

Analysis of New Gaokao Reform Under the Context of “Suzhi” Education for High School Students

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Abstract. This paper examines the implications of the New Gaokao Reform on "suzhi" education, a holistic approach to education that focuses on students' overall development beyond academic achievements. The reform, implemented in China since September 2014, aims to address the limitations of the traditional Gaokao system by introducing a more comprehensive and multi-criteria assessment approach. By reviewing the existing literature, this research explores the historical context of "suzhi" education and its relevance to high school students in China. It discusses previous studies and identifies possible gaps in the limited literature, focusing on the challenges of policy implementation, ambiguity, and inequality in conducting "suzhi" assessments. The study aims to provide valuable insights and implications into the effects of the New Gaokao Reform on high school students' overall development and their future educational opportunities. By analysing the motivations and goals of the policies, this research contributes to the ongoing discussion on the effectiveness and implications of the reform.

Keywords: New Gaokao Reform, "suzhi" education, high school students, China, educational policies.

1. Introduction

The recent implementation of the New Gaokao Reform in China since September 2014 has significantly transformed the country's education system. Traditionally, the Gaokao, China's national college entrance examination, has been a high-stakes and highly competitive test that heavily influences Chinese high school students' future prospects. The aim of the recent reforms is to address the limitations of the traditional Gaokao system, which relied solely on a single criterion for evaluating students' abilities. Instead, the reforms seek to introduce a more comprehensive and multi-criteria assessment approach [1].

This analysis focuses on the relationship between the New Gaokao Reform and “suzhi” education for high school students in China. “Suzhi” education, often translated as "quality" education or "essential qualities-oriented education," emphasises students' holistic development beyond academic achievements alone. It encompasses character building, knowledge acquisition, skill development, critical thinking, and the internalisation of the knowledge [2]. Also, “Suzhi” education aligns with China's aspirations for global competitiveness and future progress [3].

The objective of this study is to examine the implications of the New Gaokao Reform on “suzhi” education and its potential impacts on high school students' overall development and future educational opportunities. By examining the motivations and goals of the reform and delving into its background and significance, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the reform's effects.

To achieve this, a review of the existing literature will be first conducted to explore the historical context of “suzhi” education in China and its relevance to high school students. By evaluating previous studies and identifying any gaps in the literature, possible challenges of policy implementation, ambiguity, and potential inequality of conducting “suzhi” assessment, this analysis will strive to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the effectiveness and implications of the reform.

2. Background

The concept of holistic development has gained prominence in shaping society and facilitating the future growth of younger generations over time. Students are expected to engage not only in academic learning but also in emotional, moral, and social dimensions of education [3]. Recognizing the significance of comprehensive student development, Chinese researchers have increasingly emphasised “suzhi” education, leading to the government's introduction of the “suzhi” education program [4]. Various provinces in China have revised, refined, and implemented “suzhi” assessment mechanisms over the past two decades.

In the realm of “suzhi” education, it can be observed that the process of its implementation and standardisation has transpired across three distinct phases. Firstly, during the preparation stage from 1999-2003, foundational work was undertaken to establish the “suzhi” assessment framework, incorporating six student development objectives. Subsequently, the implementation stage took place from 2004-2013, whereby “suzhi” assessment was piloted in various provinces, albeit without a clear directive for its utilisation in Gaokao admissions processes, instead serving primarily as a form of encouragement. Finally, the current standardisation stage, which commenced in 2014 and continues to the present, has introduced the assessment criteria centred around a five-dimensional suzhi portfolio, along with specific modifications tailored to individual provinces [3].

Meanwhile, the Gaokao has a much lengthier history. Around five years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the uniform way of conducting the Gaokao was established, replacing the previous autonomous admission system in Chinese universities nationwide [1]. As of present, the Gaokao continues to be administered annually, around the beginning of June in summer, in a similar manner, although variations exist in the number of examination days, the subjects being tested and admission policies, influenced by regional or pilot policies from the top.

Nonetheless, the history of the Gaokao reveals a significant disruption during the Cultural Revolution, starting in 1966, where it was regarded as having a capitalistic essence. This led to a ten-year hiatus nationally, which profoundly impacted the economic progress of early China, resulting in a severe setback and the subsequent decline in admission rates and the quality of university students due to changing the admission policy into recommendation. Consequently, there was a scarcity of qualified labour and human resources for the country's development and construction.

Subsequently, in response to the growing awareness among students regarding the significance of obtaining a bachelor's degree for their future career, coupled with the unequal and limited educational resources available in that time, the Gaokao became increasingly competitive and stressful. Simultaneously, China recognized and strongly believed in the importance of nurturing talents and promoting holistic student development as well. In line with the emergence of “suzhi” education, various reforms were implemented in the nationwide high school curriculum since 2000. These reforms involved the inclusion of subjects related to “suzhi”, such as practical learning courses and community service initiatives. This has shown a transition and preparation for China towards an era of multi-criteria admission, wherein evaluating students based on multiple factors gradually became the social ethos and embedded within the Gaokao reforms [1, 3].

3. Case Policies

This section aims to examine the interconnection between the “Suzhi” assessment and the specific New Gaokao reform policies. The discussion will be structured into two parts for clarity. The first part will provide a concise introduction to the concept of the “Suzhi” assessment, elucidating its essential characteristics and implications. Subsequently, a detailed exploration will be conducted to show how the “Suzhi” assessment is interwoven within the framework of the New Gaokao Reform through a focused analysis of two specific policies, manifesting both indirectly and directly.

3.1. “Suzhi” Assessment

Since 2014, the comprehensive assessment of “suzhi” gradually plays a pivotal role in the pedagogical endeavours of “suzhi” education, aiming to facilitate a more well-rounded and holistic development of students [5]. In terms of the assessment process, high school students are mandated to maintain a comprehensive personal suzhi portfolio, which is employed for important admission purposes for universities. For instance, in Beijing, this assessment occurs once per term, spanning from the first year to the third year of high school. The suzhi portfolio encompasses five overarching dimensions: 1) ideology and morality, encompassing adherence to fundamental socialist principles, patriotism, and active participation in volunteer activities; 2) physical and mental well-being; 3) academic performance within and beyond the school environment; 4) artistic achievements; and 5) experiential practices, such as internships, field trips, and community engagement [3, 6]. However, the issue of integrity has emerged as a notable contentious aspect of this intricate assessment due to its susceptibility to manipulation and falsification, given its high level of operability. This would be further analysed in the following challenge section.

3.2. Influence

3.2.1 Indirect influence: English test

An initiative was undertaken to enhance "Suzhi" education involved the reduction in the weighting of the English component in the Gaokao starting from 2014 by the Ministry of Education, which was subsequently implemented and piloted nationwide in 2017. The English test will be administered biannually, with only the best score being included in the high school students' cumulative Gaokao score. The rationale behind the decision was to reduce the study pressure and thus afford students more time to explore their personal interests and abilities, while also indirectly fostering a greater emphasis and renewed interest in Chinese subjects and culture [7]. This was expected to contribute to the improvement of ideological and moral development within the "suzhi" assessment framework above. Moreover, focusing on the practical and communication use of English rather than on the examination itself.

3.2.2 Direct influence: “two criteria, one reference”

Starting in 2018, the "suzhi" assessment has become increasingly integrated into the admission process for the Gaokao in most provinces, instead of merely reiterating the significance of "suzhi" assessment in facilitating educational reforms. The Ministry of Education has introduced this new reform policy which includes two components for admission criteria: the Gaokao score and the overall performance throughout high school, along with a reference to the Personal Holistic Suzhi Portfolio [8].

This approach was piloted through the "strong foundation plan", which was implemented as a pilot project in 39 prestigious universities in China, with the objective of cultivating individuals deemed of "high quality" by utilising the best social and academic resources available. However, the underlying purpose of this plan, as construed within the current political discourse, is not solely for the personal fulfilment of the individuals involved, but rather to meet the national requirements [3, 9].

In practice, the "suzhi" assessment outcomes are crucial in determining the admission and selection of students directly within this plan for the first time. These students are expected to not only excel academically but also exhibit well-rounded personal development. Consequently, they may be granted admission with lower entrance scores compared to high school counterparts, provided they possess specific talents in areas such as physics, mathematics, biology, and the like. For instance, Peking University's admission policy for the year 2023 relies on a formula that comprises 85% of the Gaokao score, accompanied by 15% attributed to school tests assessing basic literacy skills in subjects like English and Chinese. Furthermore, the 15% involves the evaluation of an applicant's personal Suzhi portfolio as well, which is subsequently verified through interviews conducted by the university and the government in the first place to avoid cheating [10].

4. Challenges

4.1. Ambiguity of “Suzhi” Assessment

The national curriculum reform in China has placed significant emphasis on “suzhi” education, which involves students being taught by individuals who embody certain values, norms, and overall qualities that are valued in Chinese society. However, the concept of “suzhi” has undergone transformation over time due to various social, historical, and political factors, rendering it challenging to grasp its abstract nature [3].

Consequently, as the assessment policies are becoming more focused on evaluating the holistic development of high school students, various strategies have been implemented, such as the utilisation of personal suzhi portfolios in Beijing and scoring mechanisms in Shenzhen, in an attempt to enhance consistency and efficacy through quantifying their “suzhi”. Nevertheless, the incorporation of highly regional differentiated assessment mechanisms and the evaluation of an abstract concept like “suzhi” present inherent ambiguities and a range of challenges.

Firstly, in response to the previous “English test” case policy, a student who excels in Chinese is considered a high-quality (suzhi) talent, whereas a student who excels in English but struggles with Chinese is deemed to have a lower “suzhi”. The cultivation of “suzhi” encompasses various facets and varies individually. It is inappropriate to establish a standardised “suzhi” assessment framework for students, as it fails to acknowledge the unique qualities and differences among them [11]. Moreover, the primary objective of schools remains to enhance their own matriculation rates. Regardless of the adjustments made to the Gaokao scheme, it is essential to identify the most suitable approaches to improve examination scores. This also explains the increasing stress of both high school teachers and students.

Secondly, the decomposition and synthesis of assessment dimensions pose challenges. The assessment of intrinsic qualities such as ideology and morality requires the utilisation of external indicators; however, regional disparities result in a lack of uniform or consistent evaluation standards which might be problematic. For instance, in Zhejiang Province, the indicators for assessing ideology and morality are identified as patriotism, respect for the elderly, social responsibility, and collective honour, etc. On the other hand, Shanghai incorporates students' participation in military training as one of its indicators. However, if “suzhi” assessment, like in the second case policy, is included in the scope of Gaokao admission, then the nature of the assessment itself, being a process-oriented evaluation, will gradually shift towards being result-oriented due to the highly competitive nature of Gaokao. There is a risk of the resurgence of exam-oriented education, regardless of whether the aforementioned evaluation methods can objectively reflect the qualities of high school students. In addition, when considering the long-term implications, it is possible that a focus on accentuating and fortifying students' strengths, instead of recognizing and addressing their weaknesses, may not effectively foster their comprehensive development as initially envisioned. Furthermore, the implementation of outcome-based evaluations is prone to engender disparate and biased trajectories in students' progress, thereby significantly diverging from the primary goals set forth by the policy.

4.2. Recurrence of Inequality

The original purpose of the “suzhi” assessment and Gaokao reform aimed to foster a comprehensive understanding of students and has yielded some favourable reactions [12]. Nevertheless, this intent becomes progressively distorted in a sociocultural milieu characterised by intense competition and meritocracy ideology, wherein both parents and high school students find themselves driven by anxiety and stress to surpass their peers. Consequently, educational inequality is exacerbated as affluent families gain greater access to diverse experiential activities, including opportunities for overseas experiences (One of Shenzhen's “suzhi” assessment criteria), which severely limits participation and admission for students from disadvantaged backgrounds [13, 14].

Especially, given the notable disparities in family background between urban and rural students, their possession of educational and academic capital is subject to variation. For example, both the

assessment criteria of "academic performance" and "artistic achievement" impart discernible advantages to urban students, whereas rural students already encounter challenges in attaining a foundational level of general education in their daily educational pursuits. Consequently, the imposition of uniform assessment criteria upon these distinct student populations is poised to undermine the efficacy of "suzhi" assessment, thereby perpetuating foreseeable social inequality in terms of the subsequent career trajectories for rural students since the university admission [15].

4.3. Malicious Assessment

Despite efforts to carefully scrutinise the reliability of personal "suzhi" portfolios by relevant institutions and the implementation of double-blind interviews in universities to prevent collusion and ensure fairness. In school, under some peer grading mechanisms, students might intentionally overestimate their own abilities (e.g. morality, helpfulness, positivity and kindness, etc.) while deliberately lowering the scores or grades of their peers in order to achieve a better performance for future university admissions. Additionally, during teacher evaluations, there is an implicit rule to avoid giving grades of "C" or "D" to students, as the admission rate of students and the reputation of the school are closely linked, and sometimes related to teachers' performance assessment. Unfortunately, cases like these are generally difficult to detect due to the absence of relevant supervision. Moreover, the number of students who receive an "A" grade also has a fixed proportion and it varies in different cities or provinces. As a result, each assessment is of utmost importance, and there is inevitably a strong desire for students to achieve the best possible results due to the system [3].

5. Conclusion

Overall, the reform of the Gaokao system has effectively enabled the integration and expansion of "suzhi" education by incorporating "suzhi" assessment as a criterion for university admission. The combination has brought about a novel approach to education that prioritises learning outcomes. This change has yielded several advantages and enhanced fairness in the educational system, which could be regarded as the inspiring beginning of the education reform process. However, several challenges and potential disparities have emerged during the practical implementation of these "fresh" policies. To ensure a more equitable and well-rounded educational system, further improvements and considerations are necessary.

For instance, the abstract nature of "suzhi" and its regional variations make it difficult to develop standardised assessment criteria. Additionally, the emphasis on improving examination scores and the competitive nature of the gaokao exam may undermine the intended focus on holistic development. The use of external indicators to assess specific qualities also includes inconsistencies and biases. Thus, there might be a risk of perpetuating exam-oriented education and exacerbating inequalities in students' progress if the assessment of "suzhi" is not carefully implemented. Such that, determining the content and level of differentiation in assessment criteria presents a formidable challenge for the government, as striking a balance between differentiation and uniformity is essential. By leaning too heavily towards differentiation, there is a risk of exacerbating inequality among students. Conversely, pursuing consistency excessively may also lead to the resurgence of social inequality, especially under the context of the huge gap between rural and urban areas in China. Thus, the government should carefully consider and navigate these complexities in order to ensure a more unbiased educational system.

For future Gaokao reforms, ensuring the fairness and objectivity of suzhi assessment is a crucial prerequisite for its inclusion in the Gaokao examination. Therefore, this also highlights the need for the government to establish a more stricter and transparent supervision system for "suzhi" education and future educational reforms, such as ensuring the authenticity of grading mechanisms and personal suzhi portfolio editing, in order to dispel possible doubts about its feasibility among the public, dishonesty due to the high operability of falsify and thus able to implement the reform of inclusion

of the “suzhi” assessment. In essence, it is also imperative to undertake diligent adjustment and more in-depth research of the credibility and meaning of the concept of suzhi, as well as its assessment criteria design, in order to ensure its efficacy in fostering healthy student development, measuring their abilities in a rational manner, and building up a positive ecological educational system.

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