

Analysis of the Phenomenon of Chinese Educational Involution and Recommendations

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Abstract. At the end of 2020, the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, a word suddenly became particularly popular, called "involution". Originally, this is a sociological term that refers to a social phenomenon in which the competition for social resources increases when resources are limited and there are no incremental resources. But as soon as the word appeared, it was almost immediately associated with the field of education. More and more people are trying to improve themselves by taking extracurricular classes, studying abroad, and so on, in order to get more educational and social resources, which is undoubtedly a kind of "involution". Under the current situation of educational involution, this paper will study the phenomenon of educational involution in depth, which will help to understand the concept of educational involution, its causes, solutions, and future development trends. This paper examines the causes of educational involution from three perspectives, including historical, economic, and social causes. Then, it provides two suggestions. The first suggestion is that students need to have a clear understanding of their preferences and goals and make themselves as a reference for academic progress rather than other peers; the second suggestion is to expand educational resources to reduce educational involution. Finally, it is speculated that the trend of education after involution is that the criteria for evaluating students will become diversified, and scores will no longer be the only evaluation criterion.

Keywords: Educational involution; social resource; Chinese educational involution phenomenon.

1. Introduction

After the break out of COVID-19, the imbalance between resources and need created fierce competition in society, the coronavirus has affected nearly 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries and regions worldwide [1]. The report shows that 94% of students worldwide are affected by the closure of schools and educational institutions, with the figure reaching as high as 99% in low - and middle-income countries. Financial pressures on education are also mounting. The COVID-19 has created a huge funding gap for education, which could widen by as much as 30%. Due to the severe impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, a large number of enterprises have difficulties in operation, so they have to carry out large-scale layoffs or significantly reduce the number of recruitments. In the financial sector, for example, the number of jobs providing for new graduates has dropped by more than 50% compared with the same period in 2019, according to a survey [2] and the word "involution" began to appear and be known in the field of education. "Involution" was first mentioned in the biological category. Bringing the concept of "involution" into Chinese studies is Professor Huang Zongzhi, who described "involution" as "the growth without development" for the first time [3]. For example, when other colleagues leave on time, one of them is still working overtime, and his behavior is praised by the boss. In order to avoid being perceived as lazy by the boss, others have to choose to work overtime. This phenomenon is obviously not conducive to the healthy competition of employees.

Since the 60s of the 20th century, involution has been widely used in the sociological, history, and economics to analyze the state of the development of culture. In recent years, Chinese higher education has made achievements, and the enrollment rate has increased. However, at the time of graduation, the large number of graduates from higher education conflicts with the unmatched size of the job market, resulting in employment difficulties. Thus, graduates have to strengthen their personal competitiveness to get the few matching jobs they would like to join.

In Chinese higher education, Gaokao (the university entrance examination) is the most essential path for entering a good university. Therefore, Chinese students spend much of their time studying

and even take part in remedial classes in their spare time, but the direct consequence of the involution is a general increase in test scores, which in turn increases the difficulty of competition.

The cause of the current involution of education lies in the imbalance between high-quality educational resources and the educational needs of middle-class families. Certain middle-class parents experience the rewards of education in the knowledge economy in the early development stage, but due to family economic income, most children from middle-class family need to compete for high-quality educational resources through the college entrance examination. Moreover, the fierce competition of examinations represented by the college entrance examination and the closure of examination content has caused the involution of education.

Chinese education involution is mainly reflected in the increase in parental education investment, the increase of students' learning burden, the difficulty of coursework, and the study of education involution has become an important topic in the period of COVID-19.

In 2020, some statistics show that the market size of resident training institutions is close to one trillion, and the practitioners are close to ten million. [4] In view of the current situation of educational involution becoming more and more intense, and a series of serious social problems caused by it, the country promulgated the Double Reduction Policy. The main contents of the Double Reduction Policy are to reduce the homework burden of students in compulsory education and reduce the number of resident training institutions. However, people have different opinions on the impact of the policy on the educational involution.

2. The Educational Involution

2.1 The definition and development of educational involution

The word involution comes from the book "Agricultural internalization -- Ecological Change Processes in Indonesia" by American anthropologist Geertz. According to the definition of Geertz, "involution" refers to the phenomenon that a social or cultural pattern, after reaching a certain form at a certain stage of development, becomes stagnant or unable to be transformed into another higher mode. The concept was first used to study rice agriculture in Java. In colonial and post-colonial Java, agricultural production remained unchanged for a long time, never developing but simply repeating production without increasing per capita output. It was Professor Huang Zongzhi, a famous economic historian, who brought "involution" into the field of Chinese studies. In his analysis of China's small-scale peasant economy with "involution", he referred to it as "a way to gain growth by investing a large amount of labor on a limited land", that is, a kind of over-dense growth. This view is obviously different from the original definition of involution. But Doctor Huang's description of the involution as "growth without development" vividly matches the reality of China's basic education stage.

"Educational involution" refers to the phenomenon that all subjects within the education system, such as students and their parents, constantly increase their input and gain superficial advantages through disorderly and worthless fierce competition. However, the gains are stagnant or even reduced, which leads to the alienation and degradation of the entire education ecology. Within the education system, the teaching labor input is constantly increased to achieve score growth, but the teaching efficiency and results are not significantly improved. The phenomenon stems from the close relationship between excessive and disordered education competition among provinces and cities, schools, grades, and classes. Students are undoubtedly the most severely harmed by the "involution" of education. They not only have to bear the pressure of study, but also are forced to bear the anxiety from all sectors of society. Although rates of college admission are up significantly from a decade ago, the percentage of students admitted to elite schools remains low. There were 10.78 million students taking the Gaokao in 2021, of which 40 percent, or less than half, were accepted by undergraduates. However, the admission rate for key state-funded universities is 6%, which means that only one in 17 students can go to one of them. The admission rate of Project 211 universities (namely the 100 key universities and a number of key discipline construction projects oriented towards the 21st century) is 2.4 percent. The admission rate of the University of Engineering 985

(some world-class universities) is just 0.97 percent [5]. As a result, many students fail to enter prestigious universities despite great efforts; And those students who are admitted to good universities, many also because of "study too hard" in senior high school, after entering the university, they become lazy so that they lose the direction of life, resulting in nothing when graduated.

3. The Phenomenon of Educational Involution

The most prominent manifestation of educational involution is "exam-oriented education". Exam-oriented education is a kind of education that deviates from the actual needs of human development and social development, and strives for high scores simply for meeting examinations and one-sided pursuit of enrollment rate. Suppose a student gets 90 for playing one hour and studying eight hours a day, and 91 for only studying nine hours a day. Which one should the student choose? Under the influence of exam-oriented education, people will choose the second one. In order to maximize their score, candidates have to spend a lot of time and energy on the test and study.

The first phenomenon of involution is the varying degrees of high-quality degrees in nine-year compulsory education, high school degrees, especially in key high schools, and university degrees, especially in key universities. These three kinds of degrees reflect the root cause of the problem of internal education. It reflects the fact that educational resources cannot meet the needs of all students, thus creating competition. The students in the involution think that they need to better than others in any situation, and they try their best to get a higher score, the scores rise one after another, but no matter how hard the students try, the enrollment of famous schools is almost the same every year.

The second phenomenon is the competition for better learning opportunities. The most obvious is the competition for school district housing. In the current situation of unbalanced social education resources, according to the school district housing division system, leading to high-quality education resources cluster. Thus the concept of school district housing came into being [6]. The main reason for parents to struggle for school district housing is that parents are desperate for high-quality education resources in the education environment of aspiring children. Under the principal of nearby enrollment, school district housing seems to have become the choice of many parents. Parents may not want to buy a degree house at first, but then they think about their child's future and development, and finally choose to buy it. Just as many people want to get rid of educational involution, but finally they have to participate in it in order to obtain better educational resources. The problem of educational involution not only troubles students but also troubles parents. However, if the government or the country wants to solve the problem of educational involution, it is difficult to achieve without an in-depth understanding of the causes of educational involution and finding the root cause.

4. The Causes of Educational Involution

4.1 The historical reasons for educational involution

From the Tang Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the imperial examination system has been an important force in promoting the flow of intellectuals from the lower strata of society to the upper strata, leading to the change in social structure. The Imperial examination consisted of eight sections of text, and the eight sections of text were based on the Four Books and the Five Classics of Confucianism. The majority of examinees instilled Confucianism into their minds. And the school education under its monopoly is all about the "Four Books and Five Classics." The imperial examination only tested Confucianism, which led to the candidates' neglect or abandonment of natural sciences such as geography, astronomy, physics and chemistry. In this way, the supreme feudal rulers made the scholars learn and read the Confucian classics through the imperial examination system to select the best bachelors to contribute their talents to the emperor. Thus, it can be seen that selection through a single examination began in ancient China. In summary, the involution of China is origin

from the keju policy, the involution phenomenon is now an unavoidable trend, and the history and policy factors can't ignore [7].

4.2 The social reasons for the educational involution

Social utilitarianism is one of the reasons. The utilitarian thought of society leads to the utilitarian thought of education. The utilitarian thought of education refers to deviating from the law of education and valuing the result rather than the process. Students are in the process of growth, and the utilitarian thought of education ignores their normal social interaction needs and life experience, and suppose that the main task of students is to achieve a better grade, which gradually leads to learning becoming the only task for students to do. Meanwhile, parents also lack understanding of the differences in their children's individual potential and blindly pursue test scores. In the end, it's all about utility and enjoyment, fewer and fewer people really care about integrated development or thinking about something more spiritual. And the main cause of utilitarian social thought is the unbalanced distribution of resources, resulting in the situation of short supply.

The low employment rate of college graduates is also affecting educational involution. In the past five years, the number of fresh graduates has been increasing yearly. In addition, the epidemic has caused a large number of overseas students to return, and the competition has become increasingly fierce. According to official statistics, the employment rate of college graduates in 2022 is only 23.6 percent, compared with more than 90 percent of the previous graduates. Because there are 218 million students with college degrees in China, the abundance of highly educated students makes employment increasingly difficult. At the same time, the economic downturn has caused many companies to be more cautious about hiring, which naturally gives undergraduates the feeling that jobs are becoming harder to find and even hundreds or thousands of people are competing for one position. In the future, the number of college students will not decrease but will continue to increase, companies hiring are spoilt for choice, and the recruitment threshold will naturally increase. Therefore, in order to cope with this situation, graduates can only participate in educational involution by constantly improving their competitiveness to get a job.

The recently released report on the Employment Market of College Graduates in the second quarter of 2022 shows that the CIER (Centre for International Education and Research) index of college graduates in this quarter is 0.53, which has continued to decline since the last quarter, with the impact of the outbreak of COVID-19 on employment in some regions. From the perspective of enterprises, the recruitment demand of small and micro enterprises has been impacted by the epidemic, while the demand of large enterprises has been tightened, and the educational involution of graduates has intensified [8].

4.3 The economic reasons for educational involution

The root cause of educational involution is the mechanism of distribution of wealth in the society, that is, the mechanism of distribution of job market and salary. In the face of the current situation of a sharp increase in the number of college students, various companies are also raising the recruitment threshold, if students do not have obvious academic advantages, they cannot even pass the preliminary examination of the company. For example, China National Petroleum Corporation, a familiar state-owned enterprise, is recruiting fresh graduates from the class of 2022, and more than 95% of the students selected for interviews are master's degree students from prestigious universities, so the high recruitment threshold of the company can fully see the fierce competition in the entire job market [9]. In fact, the fierce competition for employment has not only occurred in the master's degree group, doctoral students and undergraduates also cannot escape the crazy situation of involution. The economy is slowing down, the job market tends to be saturated with talent, there are fewer jobs in various industries, and these economic conditions have led to an educational involution. In the case of the employment situation is not very good, many college students choose to take the civil servant exam, in order to gain the national career work, which to a certain extent can ease the pressure of employment, but as more and more young people choose the civil servant exam, and track of the civil

servant exam examination also becomes crowded. Limited socio-economic resources mean that students have fewer options, which ultimately leads to a growing involution of education.

5. Suggestion

Educational involution, at the moment, seems to be a trend, if it can't be completely solved, then it might as well try to ease educational involution, so that students and parents are less stressed. In the studies on involution and socio-educational phenomena we can find that educational involution is closely related to perceptions and social resource allocation.

5.1 Change the students' concept

First of all, students, as the subjects of education, are particularly important in their conceptual change. Students should consider themselves as the reference object of learning development, not their peers. Only then, when formulating their own learning plans and goals, they will not blindly chase their peers and get caught up in endless competition, thus losing their learning direction. Students should not be overly concerned with the evaluation standards of others, but focus on their own uniqueness and realize their self-worth. The key to alleviating involution is for students to have a clear understanding of their own hobbies and goals to pursue, not to overly focus on the progress of others and deny themselves, and to be brave enough to make changes and refuse to go with the flow.

5.2 Expand education resources

The second issue is about educational resources. Adequate education resource is an important factor to alleviate the educational involution, and the country increasing financial investment may be able to help improve educational resources. At the same time, the development of the economy is also an important solution. After the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic, it is necessary to make the market economy recover in order for the enterprises to increase the demand for jobs and the employment rate of college students can be effectively improved.

5.3 Refer to German education model

In the future, China's education development can refer to the German education model, so that students can learn in school as well as in social practice, even students with poor academic performance can have better educational opportunities and then it will finally help to ease educational involution [10].

6. Conclusion

In summary, this study analyzes the causes and solutions of educational involution that will help to reduce the stress of students and parents at this stage, so that studying for exams and employment will not become a burden for students, and to alleviate educational involution. Perhaps in the future, after the education level is improved, the evaluation criteria for students will be gradually diversified, and the advantages brought by score will be gradually reduced, and education can return to its own value.

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