# Original Paper

# Implement Learner-Centred Pedagogy in China: What Kind of

# Inequality Issues Make the Pedagogy Hard to Work?

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# Abstract

This study explores the challenges of implementing Learner-Centred Education (LCE) in China, focusing on the inequality issues that hinder its effectiveness. The research reviews existing literature on LCE and its counterpart, Teacher-Centred Education (TCE), and examines the obstacles to LCE adoption through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital forms (cultural, social, linguistic, and economic). The findings reveal that students from families with higher capital levels adapt more easily to LCE, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds often struggle, leading to unequal educational outcomes. The study concludes that while LCE has potential to improve education quality, its implementation must be context-sensitive, considering the diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of students. Recommendations include fostering inclusive classroom environments, gradually introducing LCE, and addressing resource disparities to ensure equitable educational opportunities.

# Keywords

learner-centred education, inequality in education, pedagogy, Bourdieu's theory of capital

# 1. Introduction

Learner-centred education (LCE) is a topic that has attracted a lot of attention in the education field. Based on the constructivism theory, many scholars hold the positive attitude to the LCE because it provides a chance to the student to achieve self-oriented learning. And this kind of learning is considered helpful for learners to promote their learning ability and to explore their potential. Nevertheless, Schweisfurth (2013) believe that LCE is hard to define as it means different in varied context, and it could be interpreted differently from the perspectives of teaching pedagogy or social justice. At the same time, Schiweisfurth (2011) also points out that several countries are facing

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implementation difficulties due to all kinds of reasons including the social justice related reasons. Moreover, in the case of Namibia, it is proved that teacher-centred education (TCL) is more suitable than LCE in Namibia (Sullivan, 2004). It could be observed from these cases that LCE as an idea which advocates raising the students' voice in the teaching is considered problematic and it is sometimes hindered by some particular inequality related issues.

Thereby, Based on the China context, this article will first review the previous literature about LCE and its opposite, banking education. Then, what does LCE's implementation mean to education in China will be explained, the obstacles occur in the LCE implementation and why they occur will be unpacked through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the forms of capital in the next section. Finally, some discussions and recommendations based on the implantation obstacles and the conclusion will be given at the end of the essay.

#### 2. Method

# 2.1 Preview of LCE and TCE

#### 2.1.1 Learner-Centred Education

About the inequity brought by knowledge's imparting, Schweisfuth (2013) points out that children now in the worldwide are supposed to learn the knowledge which dose not help them to develop their future. Beck (2013) cited Young's idea about the knowledge of the power, this is interpreted as the knowledge controlled by some particular authorities. LCE was given the expectation to change the status quo which places the students in a passive state in the process of learning and teaching.

In order to answer what is learner-centred education, it is necessary to review the theoretical base of LCE. Carl Rogers (1969), the American humanistic psychologist, points out his humanistic learning theory derives from the humanistic psychology. He believes that 1) learning will become more effective when the learner perceived their own purpose of learning; 2) learn significantly from doing; 3) learners learn effectively when the external threats were minimised; 4) When the learner actively participate the learning process, the learning is facilitated; 5) the most useful learning is to learn how to learn.

Another universally accepted theoretical base of LCE is the constructivism, which was represented by Piaget's theory of cognitive development and Vygotsky's social cognition model. Fosnot and Perry (1996) summarise the learning theory derives from constructivism and depicts the LCE is constructing learner's recognition actively, rather than regarding learning as a linear process. Ricahrdson (1997) points out that constructivism suggests that learners construct their new understandings based on what they experienced and what they have already knew, he also believes that most constructivists hold the attitude that the traditional teaching approach based on information transmission from teachers to students ignored the interaction with prior knowledge and the process of internalisation of knowledge.

Overall, Benson (2012) and Schweisfurth (2013) summarised the characteristics of a learner-centred classroom as follow:

1) The current learning is built on the learner's existing knowledge and life experience which has

already perceived.

- 2) Attach more importance on learner's needs and preferences.
- 3) The curriculum is associated with learners' future development and lives.
- 4) Encourage learners to take responsibilities for their own learning.
- 5) Supportive and respective learning environment should be built in the classroom.
- 6) Communication and dialogue are frequently used in the teaching and learning.
- 7) The individual differences should be taken into account when designing the assessment.

Nevertheless, learner-centred education is also criticised. One of strongest voice claims that the LCE overemphasises the orientated role of individual goals however weakens the teacher's guiding role in the learning process. Mead (1991) believes that for some adult learners, they are likely to opt the goals which is easy to reach or which they have already achieved. Auerbach (1993) indicates that the emphasis on the individual goals without any social analysis is considered as a specific western individualism value which advocates that individual effort could alter people's lives. While, in fact, this value will give a false promise because other components like gender, race, economy and authority play the prominent role in our society. In addition, as discussed in the introduction section, LCE has its limitations on implementation. Firstly, it requires the sufficient facilities, qualified teachers and comfortable learning space. The LCE even has corresponding requirements to the curriculums' setting to some certain extent (Huang, 1996). Secondly, based on the diverse context, LCE could not be the only pedagogy fits all situations, it is necessary to treat LCE critically (Sullivan, 2004).

#### 2.1.2 Teacher-Centred Education

Freire (1970) believes education is suffered from the narration problem. He depicted the class driven by information transmission as the banking education. Knowledge in this kind of class is delivered as a gift from those who are considered knowledgeable to those who are assumed knows nothing. The Banking education is not the only interpretation of the pedagogy. McKay and Kember (1997) discussed the similar issue in Hong Kong's education. According to their research, the assumption that students want and need the spoon-feeding pedagogy is not true. Students in Hong Kong actually prefer a student-centred pedagogy, and the interviewees participate in this research were both hold a positive attitude to independent learning. Overall, banking education was criticised a lot as it enables little space for learners to explore their potential by themselves and ignored the individual's needs and goals.

However, teacher-centered pedagogy is surely underpinned by the certain theoretical base to retain a status under the constant impact of LCE. Liu (2009) points out that teacher-centred pedagogy gives educator a tool to organise and monitor the teaching process. Moreover, it is conducive to impart the common knowledge systematically. Undeniably,

It is necessary and reasonable to introduce teacher-centred pedagogy in the primary stage appropriately, especially when the educator faces a large size class.

### 2.2 The Significance of Learner-Centred Approach to Education in China

Nowadays, an increasing number of research carried out in China point out the significance of the implementation of LCE, which is expected to alter the unequal relationship between students and the knowledgeable authorities (Freire, 1970) like educators or schools.

However, undeniably, the universal use of teacher-centered approach in Chinese education suggests that it offers the higher teaching efficiency for exam-oriented education models, although it is obvious that students are put in a passive status quo in the learning process as it does not give the students the space to perceive knowledge critically. In addition, it is not conducive to the cultivation of students' self-learning ability and the development of individual interests (Wang, 2014). This kind of passive status quo could be observed in several aspects.

Firstly, as discussed above, teacher-centred approach is considered as an effective way to achieve the better academic attainment based on the examination-oriented education institution. Nevertheless, this institution itself is a mechanism for selecting the superior and eliminating the inferior, it goes against the education for all (Lu & Tang, 2007). Moreover, from the perspective of the nature of education, the neglect of the characteristics of individuals in examination-oriented education (Lu & Tang, 2007) runs counter to the nature of education: to socialise individuals by the culture heritage and to promote the development of the society and the individual, which was raised by Karl Marx and cited by Liu and Hu (2004).

However, the examination-oriented education also brings benefits in the China context. Lu and Tang (2007) believe that selecting talents with a unified score standard in a society constructed through "guan xi", which means the interpersonal relationship ensured the education equity to some certain extent because it reduced the intervention from some particular authorities.

Secondly, the national curriculums also make it impossible for students to explore and express self-learning needs in the learning process. Under the command of the college entrance examination, all the textbooks, the curriculum setting, including the pedagogy serve for this crucial examination (Wang, 2008). The question extended from this issue is how to define what should learners learn and who and how to define what to learn. It seems now knowledge is controlled by some particular authorities, learners are told what to learn rather than to explore their own interests.

Thirdly, students are learning the irrelevant knowledge to their own future needs. Schweisfurth (2013) believes this combination of wishful thinking and boredom students experience from schooling result in the poor education outcome. To take the mathematics as an example, it is universally considered useless to people's future career development. Hua (2015) indicates an increasing number of undergraduates hold negative to compulsory math class in the higher education in China. Students depicted the mathematics as a subject will never be used again after their graduation. Hence, most students are unable to seek the incentive to learn.

The three aspects above are the common explanations accepted universally to underpin the introduction of LCE in China context. In order to translate the rhetoric into the practice, to advocate the utilisation

of LCE in teaching has appeared as a requirement or guideline in some schools' or provincial teaching programmatic document. For example, the national ministry of education (2007) published *The Requirements of College English Teaching*. The core value of the document is to require the English educators to achieve the transformation from teacher-centred pedagogy to learner-centred pedagogy. It is undeniable that the learner-centred education has opened a new chapter in China. Nevertheless, given the varied issues occur in the LCE's implementation, it is still a critical topic worthy to discuss.

# 2.3 What Kind of Difficulties Emerged?

As discussed in the second section, LCE is a pedagogy emphasises the communication and personal interests, however, the fact observed from the relevant literature is that some students lack the desire of communication, sometimes they even hold the indifferent and passive attitude to express their views actively (Li, 2003), moreover, some particular students even feel anxious when they express their views (Ai, 2010) in the learner-centred classroom. In addition, according to teacher's reflections, there usually is a relatively large disparity between the levels of academic attainments which students achieved by LCE (Li, 2003). The reasons led to these facts are varied, however, some reasons behind could still be found based on the Bourdieu's theory of the capitals' forms.

Harker (1990) cited that Bourdieu believes the schools play crucial roles in changing and reproducing the social and cultural inequities. These inequities, however, result in that the cultural differences are misunderstood as the differences of individual ability. In addition, the educational system is controlled to deliver the mainstream value, pedagogy and culture which mostly represent the dominant classes (Bourdieu, 1990). According to Bourdieu (1986), the social class is constructed based on three particular capitals: the economic, cultural and social capital. In 1991, Bourdieu adds the linguistic capital into the main forms of the capital.

# 2.3.1 The Cultural Capital

The cultural capital, which could be transformed into economic capital under certain conditions and also could be reflected trough the educational qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986).the cultural capital refers any form of cultural goods like books. However, schools offer the cultural resources unevenly to students from different social classes (Bourdieu, 1977), for example, to implement the particular linguistic, pedagogy or specific curriculum, the problem is the students from the dominant social classes have already been familiar with these educational arrangements. In addition, Lareau (1987) emphasised the cultural experience obtained from the family life or the education from parents. This kind of cultural heritage enabled some particular students from higher social locations to be equipped with the knowledge required in the education and makes them success more easily than others who did not enjoy this cultural capital transmission.

Xie (2013) also indicates that in China, the cultural capital acquired from non-education factors enabled some particular students to achieve a higher level in terms of education attainment among their peers. According to Guo and Min (2006), Parents who have received higher education tend to educate their children in their family life by words and deeds, and these children universally hold positive and

open attitude to adapt the original pedagogy (LCE). From the perspective of implementing LCE in the class, educators claim that children who have received good family education are good at self-learning and exploring their own interests more than those who from the family which hold less cultural capital, as the educated parents attach importance on children's interests' cultivation and self-management (Xie, 2003).

# 2.3.2 The Social Capital and The Linguistic Capital

Social capital refers to the individual level measured by his social network (Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997). Bourdieu (1986) believes the social capital could be represented by a person's title and nobility to some certain extent. The research indicates that the families which hold the relatively large social capital are likely to spend a larger budget in education. Meanwhile, the children from these families usually enjoy the privilege in schooling, especially in terms of the higher education (Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997). Linguistic capital is associated with the other capitals. The differences in the aspects of how people speak (accent, grammar, vocabulary) reflect the individuals' social locations virtually (Bourdieu, 1977).

Nowadays, with the universal implementation of LCE, it seems like the scholars and researchers specialised in all kinds of subjects and educational branches begin to turn their attention to how to effectively implement LCE in various disciplines. However, LCE is not a panacea for some particular groups of students. Sheng (2005) indicates that it is very common that the minority ethnical students commonly keep silence in a Han and minority ethnical students mixed class. Ze Ren (2014) observes from her research that the students from Tibet are less willing to speak English or Mandarin in their language class, a large number of Tibet students experienced the ridicule from classmates when they are encouraged to share opinions in the class with a non-standard accent. In addition, LCE's implementation requires the sufficient support from the facilities and qualified teachers. Nevertheless, over emphasising the function of LCE in education and forcibly promoting LCE in some ethnic minority poor areas are also problematic. LCE may create better educational attainment in some cases, however, it is dangerous to let the LCE become the dominant pedagogy promoted in all regions as the conditions of certain areas and the quality of teachers can not reach the requirements of achieving LCE (Tamopolsky & Zhang, 2001).

## 2.3.3 The Economic Capital

The economic capital could be directly translated into the money and the property right (Bourdieu, 1986). The economic capital plays an indirect role to help individuals to acquire the knowledge. For example, Lynch and Marie Moran (2006) points out the phenomenon that the middle-class families in Ireland create the educational market and send their children to the private educational sector to secure their children's knowledge acquisition and class future.

Although the educators and students are not unfamiliar with the LCE concept, undeniably, teacher-centred pedagogy still dominates the primary and secondary education in China (Liu, 2009). To take the English class in the higher education as an example, students whose family once offered an

extra budget to send them to participate the international exchange programmes in the secondary education stage usually show the great interests in LCE and are willing to join the communication in the class actively. However, for other students who did not support by the extra expenditure from families are too shy to expose themselves in the class, since what they are familiar with is the collectivism from traditional Chinese education.

It could be easily observed that it is hard to match each situation with a certain form of capital because all the capitals influence each other potentially. Overall, students who are supported by cultural, social, linguistic and economic capitals are proved more likely to adapt LCE and achieve the satisfactory educational attainments as they enjoy the better and extra educational resource. Nevertheless, for those students who are from the families hold less capital, LCE undoubtedly imposed a burden to their learning. They may lose their confidence and obtain the unsatisfactory educational outcome. In the long run, they will be put in a disadvantage position in the accumulation of capitals passively, and then the social injustice is reproduced.

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#### 3. Result

In this part, two key questions will be discussed. Firstly, is China a proper context to promote LCE? Secondly, what should be done based on the issues analysed in the last section if LCE is expected to improve the education quality?

According to Schweisfurth's (2013) observation, learner-centred education as an individual-oriented pedagogy is employed for collective purpose in China. Compared with the teacher-centred education, the traditional pedagogy brings higher educational achievement in the examination-oriented education institution and it also brings the learning pleasure in the relatively poor conditions. Zhang and

Tamoposky's (2001) research also suggests that both teachers and students prefer the pedagogy combined learner-centred and teacher-centred. However, the information that these observations deliver to us is not that LCE doesn't work in the China context. By contrary, all the observations and issues discussed before show us an image that many pressures are at play behind the adoption of LCE, for example, the economic disparity between the urban and the rural, the differences among social classes or even the access to the resource. These factors are interconnected, moreover, they work at the same time and finally result in the children from varied social classes and ethnicities perform differently in the same LCE classroom. Although many of the literature attribute LCE's failure in some cases to teachers' misunderstanding of the LCE's nature and the incomplete adoption of LCE, it is arguable that if the injustice issues derive from the economic, social, cultural even linguistic capital, LCE may be hard to contribute better educational outcomes. What LCE means in different context and what kind of issues may LCE bring are most significant questions when LCE are given the high expectation to improve the education quality.

Aiming at the raised issues, from the educator's perspective, the recommendations are given as follow. Firstly, it is necessary for both students and teachers to respect and accept all kinds of identities from different ethnic groups and social classes. Guo and Min (2006) indicates that the teachers' neglect to those students from non-mainstream social or cultural groups will directly lead to the poor educational outcome of these students. Creating the supportive atmosphere is the priority of establishing a standard LCE classroom, the recognition from teachers and classmates plays a crucial role to encourage learners to share their experience and explore their interests. Secondly, to employ the LCE based on the learners' education background. LCE advocates building understandings based on the past learning experience and knowledge. Thereby, it is noticeable that blindly using LCE may make the students feel stressed for those who have never been in contact with LCE in their past educational experiences, how to introduce LCE step by step should be taken into account by educators. Last but not the least, the LCE's promotion will impose a burden to the teachers and students who are in the poor condition when it brings individual educational attainments for the students learn in the comfortable environment and taught by qualified teachers. Thereby, schools must make sure the voice and the needs of students and teachers are heard, and the LCE should be employ critically.

#### 4. Discussion

This essay unpacks from the LCE's implementation in China and from the perspective of social justice explains the existing practical issues during the process of adopting LCE with Boudieu's theory about forms of the capital then some recommendations are given aiming at the discussed issues. It could be observed from the analysis above that as a reform of pedagogy, LCE has made a contribution to improving the quality of learning with the universal promotion, especially in terms of English teaching profession in China (Hou, 2005). Nevertheless, some of the obstacles occur in the implementation, such as resistance to this original pedagogy and the negative attitude from the students or the unsatisfactory

learning outcomes are frequently discussed by the researchers. Some general comments attributed LCE's failure to the teachers' misunderstanding of LCE. On the contrary, this essay tries to seek the reasons behind the students' resistance. Overall, how students perform in the LCE classroom is associated with the cultural, economic, social and even linguistic capital transferred from their family. Students with the rich cultural experience in their past life tend to hold the relatively open attitude to LCE. By the contrary, students from the families hold little capitals are more likely to hide themselves in the mainstream students. For example, the ethnic minority students are used to being silent when they are encouraged to share experiences or express their views, as they are afraid to be rediculed at by Han (the ethnic group which accounts for the largest population among all the ethnic groups) students because of their accent or their non-standard answers. It could be observed from this case that: 1) the heritage of all capitals are influencing the children's performances in schools and it is for schools to enlarge or reproduce the social and cultural injustice; 2) LCE is not a panacea for all the context, even in a nationwide, LCE also should be implemented critically; 3) in order to establish a supportive environment for LCE, it is necessary for educator and students to accept and respect the all the identities from different social classes and culture, even the past living experience.

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