

Poverty Caused by Education: Educational Issues in China in the New Era

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Abstract: Education, as one of the forms of human capital investment, especially in developing countries, is considered an important way for families to get rid of generational poverty. The contradictory “poverty caused by education” is an education problem in the new era. It is a social phenomenon in which family members (children) receive education and cause family economic poverty. Based on the connotation of “poverty caused by education,” this paper analyzed its formation mechanism from the three levels of society, family, and school and tried to give some suggestions to reduce the risk of “poverty caused by education effectively.”

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Question

IN the 1960s, a new economic theory emerged rapidly in the latest technological revolution and industrial structure changes: human capital theory. The theory believes that human capital accumulation is the source of economic growth. Through human capital investment, laborers can improve laborers' quality, increasing labor productivity and increasing income, reducing income inequality, and promoting the equalization of income among all social strata. It is the main pathway of national and personal development.

Under the advocacy of human capital theory, education is regarded as the most basic human capital investment. According to statistics, the education expenditure of developed countries in Europe and the United States accounts for about 11% of the country's public financial expenditure, of which 15.8% in the United States and only 8.2% in Japan are the two extremes. In emerging countries, education expenditures in China and India account for 13%-15% of public fiscal revenues and show an upward trend year by year (https://m.sohu.com/a/351989284_550966/). This shows that education development has become the main action plan and policy focus of all countries to fight against poverty.

However, "poverty caused by education" has become a hot topic in recent years and has attracted widespread attention in various fields. On the one hand, low-income families hope to get rid of poverty entirely by allowing their children to receive education, and on the other hand, they fall into a more impoverished state because of high education costs. This phenomenon, which seems to violate common sense, is an abnormality that occurs under the combined effect of cultural inclination and the education system. This paper considered and discussed the abnormal phenomenon of "poverty caused by education" and aimed to explore its specific reasons, propose solutions to reduce education risks, and provide specific support for promoting educational equity.

The Meaning of "Poverty Caused by Education"

Definition of Poverty Caused by Education

"Poverty caused by education" is not a recent phenomenon. Scholars have studied it as early as the beginning of the 21st century. Chengxin Wang and Gefang Wang (2003) from China discussed road "poverty caused by education" earlier. They believed that education consumption is one of the new poverty-causing factors in rural areas; high education expenses had caused some rural families to fall into poverty. Although they did not elaborate on the concept of "poverty caused by education," they gave a particular explanation of the phenomenon of "poverty caused by education" in terms of occurrence.

Yu Shihua (2006) clarified the concept of education-related poverty in the article *"An Analysis of the Causes of Poverty Caused by Education."* In this study, it was believed that "poverty caused by education" is also called "education leads to poverty,"

and the normative term is “education consumption poverty,” which refers to the fact that individuals who receive education lead their families or themselves into poverty. In Yu’s study, the object of “poverty caused by education” has expanded from solely rural families to families whose children were receiving education, greatly extending the scope of research objects. It is the most currently practical definition of “poverty caused by education.”

This article defines “poverty caused by education” as the situation in which the family’s living conditions cause temporary poverty or decline to poverty due to the children’s education.

The Manifestation of Poverty Caused by Education

According to the types of poverty caused by education, it can be divided into “becoming poverty due to education” and “returning poverty due to education.” “Becoming poverty due to education” refers to families with ordinary economic conditions, in order to enable their children to receive primary education, all the limited income is invested in education, causing family life embarrassment and financial constraints. “Returning poverty due to education” refers to the phenomenon that the family’s economic status was initially good, and the family’s economic expenditure was too single and excessively high due to a large number of educated children or the pursuit of high-quality educational resources (Peng, 2009).

From this classification, we can also see that this distinction between “poverty caused by education” is because the causes of temporary poverty and long-term poverty are various. Temporary poverty is often caused by some adverse economic shocks, while long-term poverty may be related to the lack of economic opportunities. The different formation mechanism also means that there will be quite different governance methods.

The Formation Mechanism of “Poverty Caused by Education”

Economic Dilemma in the Period of Social Transformation

Economic poverty is the root cause of “poverty caused by education.” This kind of economic poverty refers to the per capita poverty due to uneven economic development during China’s social and economic transformation and the regional low-income poverty of urban fringe families and rural families in central and western regions. As a developing country with a large population, China’s modernization process started late. Compared with developed countries in the world, the economic level is backward. China’s annual per capita GDP level is shallow. According to the information published by the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the per capita GDP of developed countries in

the world exceeds 47,000 US dollars, of which the per capita GDP of the United States exceeds 62,000 US dollars, and the per capita GDP of Germany is approximately 48,000 US dollars. As a developing country, China has a relatively large GDP, but its per capita GDP is only US\$9,630. Although with economic growth, China's per capita GDP exceeded 10,000 U.S. dollars in 2019, compared with developed countries, China's per capita GDP is still very low. (<http://www.ymcall.com/artinfo/055864269852020038.html>)

According to the China Statistical Yearbook, 250 million people lived in poverty in China in 1978, and 40 million people were in poverty in 2008. With the advancement of poverty alleviation through education in China, China's rural poverty population decreased to 5.51 million in 2019, and the poverty incidence rate was 0.6% (based on the 2010 poverty standard, that is, the annual per capita income is 2,300 CNY) (China Statistics Bureau, 2020). In terms of national per capita disposable income, the per capita income in 1998 was 2,161 CNY (China Statistics Bureau, 1999), and the per capita disposable income of Chinese residents in 2008 was 10,271 CNY (China Statistics Bureau, 2009), which increased to 30,732.8 CNY by 2019 (China Statistics Bureau, 2020). This showed that China had a relatively large number of poor people for an extended period and low per capita disposable income. Especially in rural areas, the limited household disposable income is a direct manifestation of economic poverty. On this basis, education expenditures motivated by returns may directly cause families to fall into poverty.

School-Level Reasons

As an essential part of the education system, school education is the core and key to promoting human growth and the main factor in the family's educational expenditure. Because of this, the school has become a prerequisite direct cause of "poverty caused by education." When high education costs result in a sluggish reward on education, education will inevitably cause poverty or temporary poverty to families, especially those with low and middle incomes.

● High Education Costs

Simultaneously with the human capital theory is the concept of education cost in academic economics. In its concept, the entire cost of school education constitutes its cost, including tuition, miscellaneous fees, books and stationery, cultural and sports fees, transportation, accommodation, etc. According to the principle of cost-sharing and the unique attributes of education, as consumers of education services, families must partially share the costs (Fan & Zhou, 1998). Since the implementation of nine-year compulsory education in China in 2006, school education in the first to the ninth grade of compulsory education is a system-generating public product, which is fully paid for by the government, instead of compulsory education, especially the education cost of higher education, which needs to be paid by families.

Since 2000, with the sharp increase in price levels, the cost of running colleges and universities and training students' costs have risen sharply. The resulting higher education tuition, living expenses, and other expenses continue to increase. According to the statistics of Chen et al. (2016), in 2016, except for Jiangxi, where the increase in tuition fees was 2.3%, most of the increase in tuition fees was 20%-35%. The high cost of education makes education expenditure a large proportion of household expenditure.

The non-compulsory education costs also include preschool education and high school, the rising tuition and miscellaneous fees, high school choice fees, and other expenses for the children of migrant workers. Although the Finance Department of the Ministry of Education's relevant regulations, the school's tuition and miscellaneous fees are only part of the education cost per student. However, relative to the limited family income, high education expenditures will inevitably cause many families to fall into economic poverty (Lu & Wang, 2007).

- School Knowledge is Out of Touch With Society, and High Investment, Low Reward

Analyzed from the perspective of input and output, families pay for their children's high education costs and purchase educational products from schools to improve their living conditions and get rid of poverty by investing in education. However, facts have proved that the high investment has not met or even far below the expected return expectations. The school products purchased by the family's children face the lack of value in the market, which is manifested in difficulty in finding jobs, low salaries, low talents, and difficulty in using what they learn, and unemployment of knowledge for college students receiving higher education (Ye, 2010). Of course, this low value facing the market has many reasons for its formation, such as the long-term and continuity of the economic benefits of education, the rapid development of knowledge and technology, the disconnection between school education and the market, information distortion, and misconfiguration. However, this kind of depreciation and low value-added school products directly constitutes "poverty caused by education" (Yang, 2007).

Family-Level Reasons

Family is the direct carrier of "poverty caused by education." In addition to low family income, other factors such as the family's location and the educational concepts of family members also constitute the essential factors of "poverty caused by education."

- Unbalanced Development in the Area Where the Family is Located

Contemporary Western consumer sociology regards the relationship between consumption and social stratification as one of its main research objects. It believes that social class differences affect consumer behavior (Baudrillard, 1968; Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas & Isherwood, 1980). Since the reform and opening up, with the intensification of social transformation, China's class structure has undergone tremendous changes. Among them, the economic foundation has become an essential factor in class division.

As a social existence unit, the family has a close symbiotic relationship with the community and region where it is located. Due to the unbalanced social and economic development, the Chinese class is greatly affected by the region. There is a clear gap in household income between the eastern coastal and central and western regions. Moreover, there is also a partially uneven development within the same area. According to the China Statistical Yearbook statistics in 2020, China's annual per capita disposable income in 2019 was 39,438.9 CNY in eastern China, 26,025.3 CNY in central China, 23,986.1 CNY in western China, and 27,370.6 CNY in northeastern China (China Statistics Bureau, 2020). From the data point of view, there is a big difference between the eastern region with the highest per capita income and the western region with the lowest per capita income; and the incidence of urban poverty in the central and western regions is higher than that in the eastern region.

From the perspective of social class classification, education consumption also has a clear gap. In regions and towns where the economy and culture are relatively more developed than others, the overall household income level is higher, and the consumption capacity is also more robust. Therefore, they can pay for their children's education without affecting their basic material life; and this kind of education payment is more inclined to consume to promote their children's higher-level development. On the contrary, in the relatively backward central and western regions and poor villages, their income sources are limited due to historical traditions, natural resources, and policy trends. The economic and cultural level, educational resources, and level are obviously at a disadvantage. Especially in some remote villages, the educational infrastructure is backward, and high-quality educational resources are lacking. In the case of limited ability to pay, facing the same "education price" in the whole country, household poverty, and extreme poverty will inevitably arise (Qin, 2005).

● Chinese Traditional Thinking on Education

Ideas have substantial control over actions. Parents choose education expenditures by judging the value of their children's school education. The root cause of "poor education leads to poverty" lies in improper selection caused by lagging values. This concept is rooted in traditional educational thinking. The first is the education-only talent view and the idea of "the higher the education, the higher the income." The second is the value of "mental workers govern people, and people govern labor workers," and the resulting prejudice against vocational education. The third is the value of "breaking away from farmers," that is, through education, to change destiny, change farmers' identity, and leave the farmlands (Lu, 2017).

Under the influence of the above thoughts, parents' education investment has greater blindness. Especially in low areas, the pursuit of higher education is more fanatical and single-minded. Doubt and deny vocational education. The demand side has catalyzed school choice, the expansion of higher education, and a series of over-education, devaluation of knowledge, and employment difficulties. Because the high investment in education and the expected reward are not obvious or even in vain, "poverty caused by education" naturally occurs (Wen & Tan, 2015).

● Excessive Family Education Investment

Economists often use some data indicators to measure the level of development of a society. For example, on the average level of social statistics, the higher is the proportion of household expenditure on food to its income (the so-called “Engel coefficient”), the more “underdeveloped” the society is. On the contrary, the higher is the proportion of household expenditure on education and culture, the more developed the society will be. In all the statistics of developed countries, the family’s expenditure on children’s education does not exceed 10% of family income (Liu, 2006).

According to the report “The Value of Education: Looking Ahead” published by HSBC in 2017, Hong Kong, China’s average education expenditure is as high as 132,161 USD, which is three times the global average, ranking first in the world; Taiwan, China is ranked fourth as 56,424 USD. Mainland China ranked fifth with 42,892 USD. Taken together, Chinese parents spend the most on their children’s education in the world (HSBC Holdings Limited, 2017).

Coincidentally, in 2017, the China Institute of Educational Finance of Peking University (from now on referred to as the Institute of Finance) cooperated with the Southwestern University of Finance and Economics China Household Finance Survey and Research Center to conduct a follow-up survey of Chinese household education expenditure. According to its data, in the first semester of 2017, the overall scale of family education expenditures in China’s essential education stage was about RMB 1,904.26 billion, accounting for 2.48% of GDP in 2016, more than half of the national fiscal expenditure (the national financial education expenditure in 2016 was 3,139.6 billion CNY). This again shows that Chinese families attach great importance to education investment and are willing to spend money on education (Wei, 2020).

Government-Level Reasons

As the master and distributor of social resources, the government should be its essential duty to eliminate any form of poverty. In recent years, under the promotion of education poverty alleviation policies, the government has paid more attention to children’s education in low areas. However, in the actual implementation process, due to its limitations during the social transformation period, the government’s unclear functions have led to deviations in policy formulation. Insufficient education support and other issues have significantly weakened the intensity of education for poverty alleviation, which has become an inevitable factor of “poverty caused by education.”

● Insufficient Financial Education Funds

Since the 1960s, the international community has begun to use the ratio of public education funding to GDP (or GDP) as an indicator to measure whether a country’s public education funding is sufficient; and the government’s efforts to invest in education. The World Bank defines “public education expenditure” as “public expenditure on public education plus subsidies for private education.”

Since the 1990s, China has been using the indicator “fiscal education expenditure” to measure public education expenditure provided by the government. The “*China Education Reform and Development Program*”¹ promulgated by the State Council in 1993 first put forward the strategic development goal of “Financial education expenditures as a proportion of GNP, reaching 4% by the end of the 20th century”. Since then, the government has repeatedly explained and emphasized this goal through a series of policies and documents. However, it was not until 2012 that this goal was indeed achieved. It has remained at the bottom 4% for the next six years. According to statistics, China’s fiscal education expenditures accounted for 4.04% of GDP in 2019 (Ministry of Education of China, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The 4% ratio is only the average level of “developing countries” in the 1980s. According to the statistics on education expenditure of various countries released by the World Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2016, the proportion of public finance education expenditure in GDP in each country is generally between 3.42% and 7.26%. The average of OECD countries is 4.79%, and the average of 22 EU countries is 4.75% (OECD, 2016). In contrast, although China’s financial education expenditure is close to the average level of upper-middle-income countries, there is still a significant gap compared with high-income countries; it is 1.1 percentage points lower than the average of 22 EU countries and also lower than the OECD Organization national average (Chen & Zhi, 2018).

● Unreasonable Education Layout

Affected by the national system, education is part of the national administrative management, and the national administrative management system restricts education development. In 2001, China promulgated the “*Decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education*,”² requiring local governments to adjust the school layout according to local conditions. Under this policy, various localities have begun to abolish and merge schools on a large scale, and a large number of original primary and middle schools in rural areas have been abolished so that students are concentrated in a small number of urban schools. The purpose of relocating and merging schools is to adjust and optimize the school layout. However, some schools’ excessive withdrawal has led to significant long-distance, expensive and difficult schooling for students. The cost of education has also increased intangibly, which has significantly increased the financial burden of low-income families.

Tan & Li (2018) investigated the “poverty caused by education” in poverty-stricken families in a county in Gansu Province and found that the central elementary school of the township government after the relocation of the county and the merger of the school gave each person a national subsidy of 625 CNY per semester. However, due to the limited teaching level of the teachers in the central elementary school, the extended distance from the village, and the generally early age of the students, many parents of students choose places with relatively close distances and relatively high levels of education to let their children go to school. According to a survey of boarding students in the central elementary school of the township government, the cost of living in

school per student per year is about 2,500-3,000 CNY, which is undoubtedly an enormous economic burden for the majority of rural families, and some even directly caused poverty caused by education.

● Imperfect Related Policies

High-quality poverty alleviation by education is a crucial way to block the intergenerational transmission of poverty and an important starting point for improving the poor's ability to become rich. The government has promoted education and poverty alleviation in China through policies (Zhang, 2020), but many problems exist in a specific implementation.

i. The Poor Student Funding System is Not Sound

Since the beginning of the 1990s in the last century, China has begun to build a subsidy system for poor college students with “rewards, loans, assistance, subsidies, and reduction” as the mainstay. In the past ten years, the funding mechanism for needy students in universities has been substantially improved. The national green channel for student assistance and a small number of commercial loans have been implemented simultaneously, and the economic problems of some poor students have been alleviated to a certain extent. However, it cannot be ignored that China's poor college students, especially the private colleges and universities' funding system for needy students, have a certain degree of institutional deficiencies (such as low management channels and limited funding coverage) resolved. Liao & Cao (2015) pointed out that China's current funding for poor students is small, narrowing coverage and insufficient protection. In particular, the funding mechanism's effectiveness for needy students in private universities should be brought into full play.

ii. Imperfect Employment Policies for College Graduates

With the rapid development of higher education's popularization, the number of university graduates has increased significantly. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, the number of college graduates in 2020 is as high as 8.74 million, and the cumulative number of graduates in the past ten years has reached 76.03 million. The difficulty of employment continues to increase (Wang & Hu, 2020). Especially for those college students who came from disadvantaged families, it is more difficult for them to find employment. On the one hand, they lack specific social capital, such as interpersonal networks and sufficient information resources.

On the other hand, the country's overall job market also has certain shortcomings, such as imperfect government policies on employment and inadequate implementation of some policies. Various factors make it difficult for poor college students to find ideal jobs. High investment in education has not been rewarded accordingly. Therefore, the current situation of family poverty cannot be improved through education, and even some families fall into a more impoverished state due to education loans (Zou & Zheng, 2014).

Some Thoughts on Solving “Poverty Caused by Education”

Promote Rational Educational Concepts

Families should establish a correct understanding of education in philosophy and choose appropriate investment methods in action. The family should not stick to the traditional social level but should consider the children’s hobbies to stimulate learning motivation. According to the children’s actual situation, choose schools and training institutions, neither blindly follow nor affected by the social atmosphere (Yang & Zhao, 2020). In particular, low-income families should focus on the future benefits of education investment and should realistically consider the current cost of education investment. In particular, the return on investment in education is time-tuned, ambiguity, and the resulting investment risks. These are issues that low-income families need to consider when determining whether to invest their limited disposable income. Families should also deepen their understanding of the government and schools’ various educational policies, school-running levels, and teaching staff, fully understand and rationally use national funding policies, avoid blind education investment, and reduce their “education-induced poverty” (Wen, 2019).

Use Information Technology to Enrich Supplementary Educational Channels

The development of school education and shadow education has both “replacement” and “complementary” relationship from the supplementary educational path. Low-quality rural and township schools stimulate students to participate in tutoring to meet the demand for teacher quality. High-quality urban schools stimulate students to participate in tutoring to improve their educational competitiveness. According to the “*Survey Report on the Status Quo of China’s Tutoring Education Industry and Teachers in Tutoring Institutions*” released by the China Education Association in 2016, the after-school tutoring industry’s market size China’s primary and secondary schools has exceeded CNY 800 billion. In 2017, the China Educational Finance Family Survey released by the Institute of Educational Finance of Peking University also showed that the out-of-school education expenditure of Chinese families accounted for about one-third of the total family education expenditure, of which education was mostly invested in off-campus tutoring institutions On (Dao et al., 2019). Even if the General Office of the Ministry of Education put forward the “*Guiding Opinions on Doing a Good Job in After-School Services for Elementary and Middle School Students*”³ in 2017, all localities are required to provide after-school services for elementary and middle school students. However, due to the school’s after-school service content that does not meet students’ needs and the lack of teachers to provide course teaching, some places even have an embarrassing situation where there are few applicants for after-school classes (Zhao &

Zou, 2019). Therefore, parents still choose to let their children go to social tutoring agencies outside the school.

With the continuous development of modern information technology, integrating information technology into education and teaching has expanded the connotation and extension of teaching and learning. It enriches the content of teaching and learning and expands the depth and breadth of teaching, and enriches students' learning methods; simultaneously, students' learning is no longer limited to the classroom. Students can also consult famous teachers and peers through the Internet. Carry out independent learning. Some schools try to use information technology to build an after-school service platform to expand supplementary educational channels; integrate school curriculum and after-school services to provide students with high-quality after-school services for free. It mostly solves families' financial pressure due to children's after-school tutoring (Xia et al., 2019).

Adjust the Educational Structure and Vigorously Develop Vocational Education

Lack of skills and difficulty in finding employment are fundamental causes of poverty and return to poverty. Vocational education is a direct and effective means of poverty alleviation. However, the current vocational education still has shortcomings in the entire education system, even being marginalized. Some vocational schools are affected by the factors of the school-running mechanism of the source of students. The advantages of running a school are not obvious, and the disadvantages are too prominent, and there is a crisis of survival.

For this reason, there was a controversy over whether to cancel vocational education. Simultaneously, many places misunderstand universal high school education (including general high school education and secondary vocational education) as “universal high school education.” The emergence of high school education that blindly attaches importance to entering a higher school neglects secondary vocational education that cultivates technical and technical talents and further eliminates vocational education's primary status (Chen, 2018).

To this end, the government should adjust the educational structure and further expand the proportion of secondary vocational promotion and university entry. Increase the free vocational education, and comprehensively improve the quality and level of running schools. Form a complete vocational education system to protect the reserve labor force of low-income families. Improve medium- and long-term vocational education and skills training, and master professional skills to improve the ability to get rid of poverty and become rich.

Improve Financial Aid Policies for Poor Students, and Effectively Reduce the Educational Burden of Poor

Families

Student funding is a critical way to effectively prevent low-income families with school-age children from being impoverished due to education and families who have just escaped poverty from returning to poverty due to education. The government should improve the subsidy system for needy students at all levels and types in the following aspects to ensure that a low-income student is not allowed to drop out of school due to poverty.

1. Improve the identification of targeted poverty alleviation by education. In addition to the poverty-stricken outdoor areas identified by the poverty alleviation department, the scope of funding can be expanded for rural families with many children attending school at the same time.
2. Expand the scope of education funding. All preschool education sections, compulsory education, high school education, undergraduate education, and postgraduate education are fully covered. Full coverage of public and private schools, full coverage of students from low-income families. To ensure that “Do not let a student drop out of school due to family financial difficulties.”
3. The detailed rules for the repayment and assistance of national student loans shall be promulgated as soon as possible. Continuously improve and effectively reduce the financial burden of borrowing students (Xu, 2019).

Conclusions

From the perspective of the development of education, investment in education can bring certain benefits, specifically manifested in the return of human capital, and confirm education’s economic role. However, most of the time, we only see the promotion effect of education on the economy and one-sidedly emphasize the positive effect of education on eradicating poverty, but we fail to notice this economic function’s duality. When the investment in education is higher than the reward of education, what education brings to individuals is not to get rid of poverty but to fall into deeper poverty. This is especially true for low-income families in poverty, such as farmers, migrant workers, and laid-off and unemployed people. For such groups, school education is the most likely and most effective means for them to get rid of poverty. However, the actual situation is that this kind of family has encountered the most significant difficulties in education. Problems come from government policies, education costs, and education quality, which will affect the results of human capital investment.

We do not doubt the economic function of education to fight poverty, but there are prerequisites for the full use of this function. Without adequate policies and a complete market environment, education will not help the poor get rid of poverty and make them fall into the embarrassing situation of poverty caused by education. Therefore, we cannot take the issue of “poverty caused by education” lightly and must attach great importance to it.

Besides, the traditional cultural tendency of “hope one’s children will have a bright future” makes education a competitive cultural comparison. Many parents have joined the “competition” of education. However, in this process, the true nature of education investment has been neglected, and the cost of education has increased substantially. This is not good for the growth of the family or the students. For this reason, the government should guide families to view education investment and choose education methods rationally. Especially for poverty families, they should effectively guard against investment risks and effectively reduce their education investment pressure.

We have seen that some schools have taken the lead in using information technology to solve educational problems in low areas. Modern distance education information technology and the combination of distance and face-to-face instruction are used to transport high-quality education and training resources to poverty-stricken areas free of charge. This is the current direction for universities and local governments in poverty alleviation by education (Ding, 2018). This method can solve the problem of a lack of quality education resources in impoverished areas. In response to the proliferation of after-school tutoring in urban elementary and middle schools, schools should open a free after-school service platform, use information technology to expand student learning paths, and reduce families’ financial pressure due to extracurricular tutoring (Wang, 2020).

Notes

1. The State Council of China. (1994) *Implementation Opinions on the “Outline of China’s Education Reform and Development”* (Guo Fa [1994] No. 39), 07-03
2. The State Council of China. (2001) *The decision of the State Council on the Reform and Development of Basic Education* (Guo Fa [2001] No. 21), 05-29
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