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# *Breaking Impasse and Restructuring: The Transformation of Basic Education from Exam Screening to Innovation Empowerment*

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***Abstract.*** At present, the international competition landscape has undergone profound changes. China is at a critical stage of leapfrogging from technology catch-up development to innovation-led development. This requires basic education to focus on cultivating students' innovation awareness and inquiry ability while strengthening knowledge impartation. However, the current talent cultivation model of basic education cannot meet the needs of social development, which is rooted in the fact that the value orientation of basic education deviates from the education-oriented essence and is narrowed into a tool for hierarchical screening. To cultivate innovative talents, basic education needs to build a diversified evaluation system combining summative assessment and formative assessment, promote the transformation of teaching methods from knowledge cramming to personalized inspiration, and create a school cultural atmosphere that encourages inquiry and embraces diversity.

***Keywords:*** basic education, innovative talent cultivation, educational evaluation, teaching reform

## 1. Introduction

The world is undergoing major changes unseen in a century. A new round of scientific and technological revolution represented by artificial intelligence and big data is at the critical point of outbreak, which triggers not only the transformation of economic form, but also the fundamental reshaping of human knowledge production mode and labor quality structure. China is in a critical period of moving from the middle and late stages of industrialization to a knowledge-based economy society, and independent innovation capability has become the core element to enhance the country's comprehensive competitiveness. The key to improving independent innovation capability lies in talents, especially top-notch innovative talents. Therefore, cultivating top-notch innovative talents has become the key to building a country strong in education and a country strong in science and technology [1]. As the foundation of building a country strong in education, basic education undertakes the important task of early cultivation of top-notch innovative talents.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, under the overall leadership of the Communist Party of China, China's basic education reform and development have made great

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achievements [2]. However, when the driving force of national development shifts from capital investment and labor quantity to knowledge innovation and technological breakthrough, the contradiction between the talent specifications cultivated by basic education and social needs has become increasingly prominent. This contradiction is concentrated in the fact that although students have accumulated a solid knowledge foundation in the basic education stage, they generally show problems such as insufficient innovation momentum, weak critical thinking and lack of intrinsic learning motivation after entering higher education and even the society. This phenomenon is deeply related to the teaching objectives, teaching methods and the social and cultural environment embedded in basic education.

Facing the era demand of innovation-driven development, how can China's basic education realize the systematic paradigm shift from "standardized screening" to "empowering development"? Centering on this issue, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of the dual manifestations of the current dilemmas in basic education, explores the problems such as the simplification of educational functions and weak innovation ability in the basic education stage, and further explores their causes. On this basis, it proposes the basic education reform paths including evaluation shift, teaching reform and ecological reconstruction.

## 2. Manifestations and causes of dilemmas in basic education

### 2.1. Manifestations of dilemmas in basic education

The dilemmas faced by China's basic education can be examined from two interrelated dimensions. First, the educational function of basic education shows a trend of simplification, and the educational objectives are increasingly narrowed. When academic scores become the dominant evaluation criterion in the basic education evaluation system, moral education, physical education, aesthetic education and labor education are easily marginalized in teaching objectives and curriculum design. Guided by the score-centered institutional incentive structure, educational objectives are narrowed to cultivating knowledge-based exam takers who meet the admission standards, rather than cultivating complete and well-rounded individuals. Students have relatively solid subject knowledge reserves, but show obvious deficiencies in sense of social responsibility, collaborative ability, creativity and psychological resilience in the face of setbacks. The structural deviation of this cultivation method is not only related to the individual development of students, but also related to the construction of the overall social spiritual ecology. A society mainly composed of individuals who are good at calculating personal interests but lack public concern can hardly form lasting cohesion and cultural creativity.

Second, basic education shows functional weakness in the cultivation of innovative talents. Against the background that the innovation-driven development strategy puts forward an urgent demand for creative talents, the talents output by the basic education system have obvious deficiencies in original innovation ability. Current teaching activities have been highly simplified into the training of knowledge memory, reproduction and application. Students' abilities are narrowed into quantitative indicators such as scores and rankings, and learning paths are preset as the linear improvement of problem-solving ability. This pursuit of definite answers and high accuracy, as well as excessive avoidance of mistakes, has greatly inhibited the growth of students' curiosity and inquiry spirit. A solid knowledge foundation is certainly a necessary condition for innovation, but when the way of acquiring knowledge shapes learners into passive recipients rather than active constructors, innovation ability can hardly get real space for development.

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### 2.2. Analysis of the causes of dilemmas in basic education

As a latecomer catch-up economy, China has deeply integrated into the global industrial division of labor system with low trial-and-error costs by introducing, digesting and absorbing international advanced technologies, and has realized the rapid transformation from a traditional agricultural country to an industrialized country. The success of this development path largely depends on the large-scale and standardized human resource support provided by China's basic education. The teaching mode centered on basic knowledge and basic skills has long dominated because it can realize large-scale human capital accumulation at the lowest cost and the fastest speed under the conditions of limited resources and tight time. However, when China's scientific and technological level enters the stage of "running side by side" and even "leading" from "following", the marginal returns of the traditional development model diminish, and insufficient innovation ability becomes a key bottleneck restricting industrial upgrading. When the social demand for talents shifts from mastering existing knowledge to creating new knowledge, the inherent inertia of this system constitutes a realistic resistance to the transformation of basic education. The educational function is narrowed into selection-oriented knowledge training, which leads to many problems such as insufficient supply of innovative talents and one-sided development of students.

At the same time, the root of the basic education dilemma is deeply embedded in the social structure. Due to the obvious stratified characteristics of the social income distribution pattern, there are great differences in income and welfare benefits among different occupations, and high-quality higher education diplomas have become a key credential for achieving social mobility. Schools are no longer first understood as educational institutions that promote individual growth, but are positioned as arenas of social competition to help students obtain admission qualifications. Under this logic, activities in basic education that cannot directly serve score improvement are marginalized, and literacy cultivation with a long cycle and insignificant effects is also difficult to obtain sustained resource investment. In addition, deep-seated cultural concepts also exert a lasting influence. The traditional value orientation of "a good scholar can become an official" formed in China's long feudal society, as well as the hierarchical distinction between intellectual elites and manual workers, still to a considerable extent shapes people's preferences for educational paths. These historical accumulations and social mechanisms overlap with each other, forming a strong inertial force, so that any attempt to change the current situation of education must face deep-seated resistance from both institutional and cultural levels.

## 3. Reform direction: return to the fundamental value of basic education and reinterpretation of teaching objectives

Facing the above dilemmas, the reform direction of basic education lies in returning to its essential attributes and reinterpreting its fundamental value. Basic education is the education provided by the state for all citizens to improve their basic quality, with three core characteristics: fundamentality, universality and preparatory nature. This positioning is the logical starting point for thinking about all reform issues.

### 3.1. Sticking to the bottom line: equity priority and qualification orientation

The universality of basic education determines that it must adhere to the inclusive principle and take equity priority as the basic rule. Any reform measure that may aggravate class solidification and expand educational disparities deviates from the fundamental purpose of basic education.

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Educational equity is not absolute equity, but a limited degree of equity, that is, ensuring that every educated person can meet the "bottom-line qualification" standard, and cannot pursue one-sided development in one aspect at the expense of another. The primary goal of basic education is to cultivate modern citizens with sound personality and qualified literacy, rather than "exam adapters" with single functions.

The preparatory nature of basic education determines that it is essentially a future-oriented and unfinished form of education. Basic education should not be regarded as an end point, but as the starting point of lifelong learning and sustainable development. Educators in the basic education stage are in the growth stage, and their development is tentative, uncertain, exploratory, unfinished and has multiple possibilities. Therefore, it is particularly necessary to guard against overly rigid summative assessment in the basic education stage. Quantitative indicators such as exam scores and admission results at a certain stage should not be given the function of "qualitative judgment" on students' future development. Teaching evaluation should dilute screening and ranking, strengthen diagnostic and developmental functions, so that every student can maintain confidence and dignity. At the same time, the universality of basic education means that it must face all students, regardless of their family background and talent differences, they should have access to education and resources that meet basic standards. This kind of equity is not simply equal distribution of resources, but focuses on ensuring that everyone can obtain the basic literacy needed to adapt to the future society.

### 3.2. Pursuing tension: from "two basics" to "willing to learn", "able to learn" and "love to learn"

For a long time, the view of teaching objectives in China's basic education has been influenced by the conventional formulation of "imparting basic knowledge and basic skills, developing intelligence and physical strength, and cultivating ideological morality". In practice, it is often understood statically and structurally as prescriptive tasks that teachers need to complete. The classroom is regarded as a process implemented according to pre-designed plans, rather than a vivid practical activity jointly constructed by teachers and students with generative nature. This relatively static way of thinking fails to fully grasp the dynamic nature of teaching as an activity that influences and develops people, and also makes teaching reform face great challenges in practical transformation.

Teaching is a two-way interaction process between teachers and students, which cannot be simplified into mechanical operations, but should be understood as a humanistic practice with moral care. The essence of teaching objectives is to pursue spiritual goals beyond basic goals such as basic knowledge and basic skills. Teaching objectives must be based on the mastery of knowledge, which is the basic premise to ensure the effectiveness of teaching. For educators in the basic education stage, direct instruction and repetitive training are effective and necessary. However, teaching cannot stop there. If students' time and energy are spent on rote memorization and repetitive training of knowledge points that may have little preparatory value for the future, even if they pass selective exams, it is difficult to achieve sustainable development. The real value of knowledge lies in its role as an intermediary to promote students' development of thinking ability, cultivate emotional attitudes and construct personal meaning.

Therefore, the value of teaching is to focus on cultivating students' endogenous motivation of "willing to learn", cognitive ability of "able to learn" and value pursuit of "love to learn" on the bottom line of mastering basic knowledge and basic skills. "Willing to learn" refers to the stimulation of learning motivation, enabling students to actively engage in learning without external

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coercion; the core of "able to learn" is higher-order thinking skills, namely cognitive abilities such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which are the key differences between knowledge creators and knowledge recipients; "love to learn" refers to students' deep interest in the subject itself, intrinsic enthusiasm for knowledge, intellectual pursuit of truth and volitional quality of persistent exploration. "Able to learn" provides the methodological foundation needed for innovation, "love to learn" provides the source of motivation for innovation, and "willing to learn" integrates the two into conscious learning actions. The three complement each other and jointly constitute the core competencies of innovative talents.

## 4. Reform path: systematic reconstruction of basic education from standardized screening to empowering education

The paradigm shift of basic education from "standardized screening" to "empowering development" can never be completed by the adjustment of a single policy, but a systematic reform involving evaluation system, teaching methods and school ecology. Evaluation reform establishes directional guidance for the transformation, teaching reform provides the core practice field for the transformation, and school ecological reconstruction provides cultural soil and institutional guarantee for the implementation of the first two.

### 4.1. Evaluation shift: from screening-oriented summative assessment to development-oriented diversified evaluation

The reform of evaluation mechanism is the key lever to promote the systematic reform of basic education. For a long time, summative assessment has occupied a dominant position in the basic education evaluation system, and its core function is screening, selection and stratification. However, basic education has the characteristics of complexity, hysteresis and long-term nature, and the effect of student literacy cultivation is difficult to be effectively presented in the short term. Therefore, excessive reliance on summative assessment with definite significance in the basic education stage is obviously contrary to the basic law of education development. Basic education evaluation should return to its fundamental function of serving human development, take promoting student development as the ultimate goal of educational evaluation, and avoid becoming an auxiliary tool for social class solidification. But this does not mean abolishing summative assessment and selective exams in the basic education stage. Under the current social development conditions, such systems are still the bottom-line guarantee for maintaining educational equity. The key to solving the problems in the basic education stage lies not in the "existence or abolition" of summative assessment, but in its "position and weight" in the evaluation system.

The key to basic education reform is to shift the focus of evaluation from "post-hoc judgment of learning outcomes" to "continuous diagnosis and personalized support of the learning process", and build a diversified evaluation integration system with clear division of labor and complementary functions between summative assessment and formative assessment [3]. In this system, formative assessment undertakes the core functions of diagnosis, incentive and guiding development, and its evaluation focus is on whether students have the basic qualities for continuous learning in the future and coping with complex challenges, including learning interest and intrinsic motivation, preliminary critical thinking and problem awareness, basic cooperative spirit and communication ability, etc.; summative assessment undertakes the bottom-line screening functions of academic achievement summary and admission selection at specific nodes, and its evaluation standards and methods also need to be gradually expanded to include comprehensive consideration of innovation

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potential, practical ability and social-emotional literacy. Based on this, basic education can explore the construction of a three-level evaluation system of "academic quality monitoring - developmental portfolios - key node assessments", in which academic quality monitoring provides macro teaching feedback, developmental portfolios systematically record students' growth trajectories in multiple fields, and key node assessments take into account academic performance and comprehensive quality. Data circulation and functional complementarity are formed among the three levels. Through such diversified evaluation integration, the utilitarian tendency of education that overemphasizes exam scores will be gradually improved, and a healthy educational ecology will be formed.

### 4.2. Teaching reform: from standardized cramming to personalized inspiration

If educational evaluation reform provides directional guidance for the transformation of basic education, then the reform of teaching methods provides a specific practical path for the transformation. The current basic education system often focuses on exam-oriented education and knowledge cramming, ignoring the cultivation of students' abilities and improvement of literacy, especially paying insufficient attention to critical thinking, social-emotional competence and innovation ability, which cannot meet the current needs of social development [4]. Therefore, the teaching paradigm must shift from standardized knowledge cramming to personalized thinking inspiration, move towards a diversified educational vision oriented by all-round development, and strive to cultivate new-era talents with critical thinking, innovative spirit and digital literacy. This shift is not a partial adjustment and repair, but a systematic reconstruction involving curriculum content and teaching methods.

First of all, the reform of curriculum content needs to break through the closed subject knowledge system and build interdisciplinary curriculum forms closely related to the real world. Knowledge should not be preset as static, ready-made conclusions waiting to be transmitted, but as objects that learners actively construct in problem situations. The focus of curriculum design should also shift from the complete presentation of subject logic to the organic organization of learning experiences. Through interdisciplinary theme integration and project-based learning, knowledge can be activated in the process of solving real problems. When curriculum content establishes a meaningful connection with real life, knowledge is transformed from an abstract symbolic system into an applicable thinking tool, providing a content premise for personalized learning.

In addition, the core of teaching method reform is to reshape the fundamental pattern of teacher-student interaction. Teachers need to transform from one-way transmitters of knowledge to designers of learning situations and guiders of thinking processes. This transformation requires teachers to identify students' cognitive starting points and developmental needs through accurate learning situation diagnosis; design hierarchical learning tasks accordingly, so that learners at different levels can face challenges adapted to their own development level; organize inquiry-based subject activities to guide students to actively construct knowledge systems in problem solving; and provide differentiated scaffolding guidance during the learning process to ensure that each student receives targeted personalized support. The coordinated operation of the above practical paths can effectively stimulate students' intrinsic learning motivation and respond to their personalized development needs, so as to realize large-scale and high-quality teaching students in accordance with their aptitude in normal classrooms, enable teaching to break through the limitations of the standardized model, and move towards a new state that takes into account both common foundation and individual development.

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### 4.3. Ecological reconstruction: creating a school environment that encourages inquiry and tolerates diversity

The shift of the evaluation system provides an institutional lever for educational transformation, and the reform of teaching methods opens up a practical path for it. However, whether the two can be truly transformed into actual educational effects ultimately depends on the school ecology in which they are embedded. If the internal teaching atmosphere and organizational form of the school are still dominated by the selection logic, any improvement in evaluation and teaching may be neutralized by exam-oriented education in implementation. Therefore, to realize the deep paradigm shift from "standardized screening" to "empowering development", it is necessary to systematically reconstruct the school ecology and make it an educational field that encourages inquiry and tolerates diversity [5].

Schools need to fundamentally change their perception of "mistakes" and redefine deviations and failures in the learning process as a normal part of inquiry activities. Classrooms should allow the collision of different viewpoints, encourage students to put forward evidence-based questions about existing conclusions, and leave space for the exploration of open and non-standard answers in homework and evaluation design. At the same time, schools should establish diversified honor systems and display platforms, so that the definition of "success" is no longer limited to a single score ranking, so as to dispel the "score-only" identity anxiety at the symbolic level. In line with the reform of students' learning culture, schools should establish a teacher evaluation and support system oriented to professional development, and incorporate dimensions reflecting professional growth such as teaching improvement, curriculum development and action research into it; build teacher learning communities with lesson preparation groups, teaching research groups and interdisciplinary teaching teams as carriers, so that teachers can gain a sense of security and creativity in collaborative reflection and experience sharing. Only when teachers are fully empowered can their classrooms truly accept students' diverse ideas. Another key dimension of ecological reconstruction is to build school interpersonal relationships and group norms that truly respect differences and tolerate diversity. Schools should recognize the diversity of students' cognitive styles, growth paces and cultural backgrounds, and regard differences as available educational resources rather than defects to be eliminated. Schools should not only provide hierarchical and typed choices in curriculum supply, but also resist words and behaviors that label and hierarchize students based on scores in daily interactions, and create a school atmosphere of equality, respect, diversity and inclusiveness.

## 5. Conclusion

Located at the historical position of major changes unseen in a century, the global competition pattern is undergoing deep reconstruction, and innovation-driven has become the core strategy of national development. As the foundation of the national education system, the value orientation and education quality of basic education are directly related to the core competitiveness of the country's long-term development. The historical choice of China's basic education is to gradually break away from the utilitarian short-term evaluation orientation on the basis of sticking to the bottom line of educational equity and ensuring the supply of inclusive public education, and promote teaching to shift from one-dimensional knowledge impartation to the educational process of enlightening thinking, nurturing life, and cultivating scientific spirit and humanistic heritage. This shift is not only a strategic choice in response to the needs of the times, but also an inherent return to the educational essence of educating people. Only by completing this deep transformation can basic

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education truly realize the deep transformation from "standardized screening" to "empowering development", continuously cultivate reserve talents with both innovation potential and comprehensive literacy, provide solid talent guarantee for the national independent innovation system, and lay a solid foundation of national quality with endogenous vitality for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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