

# Educating for Wholeness, but Beyond Competences: Challenges to Key-Competences-Based Education in China

ECNU Review of Education  
2020, Vol. 3(3) 470–487  
© The Author(s) 2020  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/2096531120935463  
journals.sagepub.com/home/roe



**Kang Zhao**

College of Education, Zhejiang University

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article aims to conduct a critical analysis of key-competences-based education in China today by revealing three main challenges that Chinese educational practitioners, researchers, and policymakers might face.

**Design/Approach/Methods:** Against the backdrop of international and Chinese policy and the practice of key-competences-based education, this article focuses on a critical discourse analysis of this educational movement in China.

**Findings:** China places great emphasis on the personal, cultural, and moral dimensions in generating a framework of competences, paying considerable attention to the well-being of children; hence it currently endeavors to provide a consistent educational framework to educate the young for the all-round development. However, three challenges are salient: the dilemma between *Core-Suyang* (Core-Competence) and the education for all-round development of the young, the limitations of design of “subject core-competences,” and a lack of consideration of subjectification as purpose of education.

**Originality/Value:** Education which merely focuses on a list of key-competences might not only exclude non-key-competences but also exclude something unforeseen and unknown in the

---

## Corresponding author:

Kang Zhao, Department of Educational Studies, College of Education, Zhejiang University, 866 Yuhangtang Road, Hangzhou, Zhejiang 310028, China.

Email: kangzhao@zju.edu.cn



Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

process of educational adventure. It is therefore suggested that a holistic education needs to be engaged in with an encompassing and dynamic view of purpose(s) of education, in which the education for subjectification is at stake in our educational endeavor.

### **Keywords**

Curriculum, key-competences, purpose of education, subjectification, subjectivity, wholeness

Date received: 15 February 2020; accepted: 27 May 2020

### **Introduction**

In the last few decades, there has been a new widespread educational movement guided by the language of “key-competences” which was developed and elaborated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the European Union (EU), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and many countries around the globe. China is not an exception to this international trend. Historically speaking, competence-based education (CBE) is not a totally new concept, but actually appeared during the 1950s and 1960s and flourished during the 1970s, aimed at the training of school teachers in America. It then was adopted in the field of vocational education, including teacher education, in Canada, the United Kingdom, and other European countries in the 1980s (e.g., see Zhao, 2016). It gradually declined in the 1990s due to its strong emphasis on the measurement of teachers’ behavior justified by behavioral psychology and negligence of the teacher as a whole person. Thus, to say that the current trend of CBE is *new* actually means many things. It emerges from a new social, economical, and political atmosphere; the concept of competence is given newer connotations; it reaches beyond the fields of teacher education and vocational education, extending into the heartland of basic education, higher education, and lifelong learning. Hence, this trend is a result of a range of new changes in our time.

Although the new trend of key-competences-based education is often criticized for its emphasis on instrumental functions for the implementation of economic and political agendas, the localization of key-competences in China introduces the personal, cultural, and social dimensions into the list of the competences, paying considerable attentions to the well-being of the children, hence it is a great step toward educating for wholeness of the person. However, the new trend of competences-based education is not without issues and challenges in China. In this article, I endeavor to conduct a critical analysis of this educational movement within a Chinese context. I mainly take a critical discourse analysis approach, as it enables alternative readings and interpretations of educational policy texts, in particular those that are silenced by dominant social institutions (see Gibb, 2008). I will do this in the following steps. After offering a general account

of the global phenomena of key-competences-based education, I present a brief history of the all-round development of education since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Against this background, I depict a picture of how the key-competences-based education emerged in China. Then I reveal three challenges to this mode of education at a conceptual level, a practical level, and a normative level, respectively, vis-à-vis educating for wholeness. I conclude this article by arguing that while key-competences-based education makes great contributions to a more holistic education, and is more measurable in terms of learning outcomes, we also need to engage in education that is beyond competence.

### **Key-competences: A “new” mantra of education in our age**

In the past few decades, there has been a strong tendency toward key-competences-based education advocated by the policies both at an international level and at a local level. At an international level, the OECD first created and highlighted the idea of key-competences by enriching its connotations, and disseminated it globally soon after. From 1997 to 2005, the OECD invited a large number of scholars from a wide range of disciplines to conduct research on the concept of competency, and finally produced a report titled *The Definition and Selection of Key Competencies* (DeSeCo) (OECD, 2005). In order for a successful life and well-functioning society, the OECD assumes that young person should develop some key competencies that are necessary in the 21st century. It defines a competency (which is generally synonymous with competence) as “more than just knowledge and skills,” but it “involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context” (OECD, 2005, p. 4).

Following the OECD, the EU also started its work on the concept of competence. In 2006, the *Official Journal of the European Union* published a document titled *Recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. As an annex of this document, *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning—A European Reference Framework* is published. In this document, key competences are defined “as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfillment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment” (Gordon et al., 2009). This framework accommodates eight domains of competences.

Then, in 2013, the UNESCO, in cooperation with the Center for Universal Learning at Brookings in the U.S., published a report called *Towards Universal Learning: What Every Child Should Learn* (UIS & CUE, 2013), proposing seven domains of learning as a global framework of learning domains, with three levels of competencies that students should acquire.

The trend of key-competences-based education is obvious not just at a global level. At a local level, the U.S. is an important proponent to support this mode of education, though the term used

is mainly “skill.” This is reflected in its *Framework for 21st Century Learning* produced at the beginning of the 21st century, aiming for the acquisition of the 21st Century Skills. Also, with the top-down impacts of policy discourse of gigantic international organizations, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore, to name but a few, all work out their frameworks of key-competences in recent years.

The international trend of key-competences-based education seems to reflect a “global imperative” of educational change (Shirley, 2016). Behind this educational change, there are the urgent demands and requirements of economic, political, and technological changes at the beginning of the 21st century, such as knowledge economy, digital technology, and international cooperation. To educate the young generation to adjust to these global changes, competence becomes a new “mantra” of education in our age, but in a much broader spectrum of the educational field than it was in the 20th century.

Over the years, many critiques of competences-based education have appeared. At the conceptual level, competence is fraught with not only different official definitions as I have shown above, but also complex ideas given by many experts from many disciplines, and hence needs to be understood in specific academic traditions and contexts (e.g., see Cui, 2016b; Deakin, 2008). At the normative level, the key-competences-based education is hailed by many as a good thing in various aspects and ways (e.g., Gordon et al., 2009), particularly, it shifts educational focus from knowledge to ability, and is regarded as a holistic approach to education (e.g., Korthagen, 2004). However, it is poignantly regarded as an instrumental view of education for the political and economic agenda of international organizations or different countries (e.g., Biesta, 2013). Some people also consider that it actually leads to a discrete and fragmented education, rather than a holistic education (e.g., Stefan, 2007; Tröhler, 2011; Willbergh, 2015). It is also blamed for its effect of standardizing education, for example, through PISA (OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment), at a global level, making the diversity of educational forms difficult or impossible (e.g., Biesta, 2013, p. 123).

In recent years, China has also become involved in this new trend, under the aegis of the official purpose of education for the all-round development of a person. To a certain degree, the critiques of competences mentioned above may be appropriate to Chinese milieu as well. But are there any different things to say about the Chinese case? Before we look closely at the Chinese case, it is necessary to first have a look at a brief history of the education for all-round development of the young since the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

## **The education for all-round development of the young in China: A brief history after 1949**

After 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded and started to reform the old educational system, the leader of the country, Mao Zedong, has pointed out in the early 1950s

that education should help the young generation to do well in their study, work, and health, which is called “three-good” (三好). Directed by Mao’s educational ideas, in the late 1950s, the central government officially advocated the education for all-round development of the young, which was constituted by moral education, intellectual education, and physical education, aiming at educating the young to be the all-round socialist laborers for China (see Ruan, 2019; Z. Shi, 2019).

The Chinese policy of the education for all-round development of the young with an ideological purpose continued for a couple of decades. In the late 1970s, China adopted Open-Door Policy, leading to huge transformations occurring in all walks of life. In 1981, Deng Xiaoping, the country’s leader at that time, developed Mao’s idea of the education for all-round development of the young by adding “four-acquisition” (四有) to the moral, intellectual, and physical education, that is, the young generation should acquire ideals, moralities, knowledge, and disciplines through education. And noticeably, from the early 1980s to the early 1990s, China strengthened its policy of the education for all-round development of the young with a theoretical justification supported by Marxism on human development (see Ruan, 2019; Z. Shi, 2019; Tong et al., 2018).

For decades, despite the policy of the education for all-round development of the young, China’s basic education had actually been dominated by knowledge-based education since the 1980s, evaluating students only by means of written tests and examinations on each taught subject. It was not until after the early 1990s that China began to be aware of the problem, and tried to strike a balance between the examination-based education and the quality-based education. This educational change was advocated by the central government with a huge task of continuing to promote the education for the all-round quality of a person, rather than assessing students merely by test paper. The term “quality education” then began to appear in the central government’s documents between 1993 and 1994. In 1997, this term was first officially articulated in a policy document issued by the State Education Commission (former Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China [MOE]), titled *Some Suggestions on Active Promotion of Implementation of Quality Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in the Current Period* (State Education Commission of the People’s Republic of China, 1997), emphasizing the ultimate educational purpose in terms of promoting the overall quality of national citizens, though it is often interpreted and practiced in terms of the individual quality of each student (see Ruan, 2019; Z. Shi, 2019; Tong et al., 2018).

In 1999, a governmental document titled *The State Council’s Decision to Deepen Educational Reform and Promote Thoroughly Quality Education* (MOE, 1999) was announced, calling for the continuing development of quality education, and adding *aesthetic education* to moral, intellectual, and physical education. The document urged educators to construct a framework of the curriculum for basic education according to the demands of quality education. Then, from 2001 to 2013, China witnessed a national curriculum reform guided and organized by the MOE. In 2001, the

MOE issued *Outlines of Curriculum Reform in Basic Education* (MOE, 2001), aimed at implementing the government's educational purpose, and promoting quality education thoroughly at a national level. It put forward an organizing principle of curriculum reform, namely, the *Three-Dimensional Objective* (三维目标), which is constituted by the dimensions of (1) knowledge and skills, (2) process and methods, and finally, (3) emotion, attitudes, and values. The Three-Dimensional Objective was a new interpretation of China's education for all-round development of the young by highlighting the importance of aspects of education beyond knowledge and skills. However, over the years, the Three-Dimensional Objective has been criticized for being discrete, ambiguous, and impractical in real situations (e.g., see Mao, 2018).

### **The rise of key-competences-based education in China: A local response to a global imperative**

In 2014, China's MOE embarked on a new round of curriculum reform based on a governmental document published on March 30 of the same year, titled *The MOE's Suggestions on Deepening Curriculum Reform Thoroughly and Realizing the Basic Task of Building Moral Character and Cultivating Humanity* (MOE, 2014), in which the concept of key-competence was first officially mentioned though it was literally formulated as core-competence. The two terms actually have no significant differences in their practical use. Soon afterward, the ideas of key-competence defined and used in the international world were introduced, reinterpreted, contextualized, and localized in China, not only through a range of educational research papers and projects but also directly through educational policies.

As seen in the MOE's *Suggestions* (2014), the starting point of the current curriculum reform is mainly to realize the educational task of "Building Moral Character and Cultivating Humanity" (立德树人). It put particular focus on educating the young to be an all-round person as the pivot of this reform. Evidently, the central government continues its long-lasting educational goal in terms of the education for all-round development of the young in the current period, hence an effort to contribute to the well-being of the young. Noticeably, in 2018, President Xi Jinping extended the idea of the education for all-round development of the young by explicitly stating at the National Education Conference in 2018 that *labor education* should be incorporated into China's education for all-round development of the young system, so that education should be conducted through "five-dimensional education" (五育), that is, the moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and labor education.<sup>1</sup>

However, when we look at this national educational move toward competences-based education from an international perspective, it actually can be seen as a local response to the global imperative. Put in another way, it is a governmental response to the "fear of being left behind" in the international competition in the field of education. Pushed by the global imperative of the trend of

key-competences education, Chinese government cannot ignore the significance of the notion of key-competences that are considered to be essential for the new generation to function successfully in the changing world in the 21st century. But competences are important not only because they are key to an individual's successful life but also because they are necessary for maintaining and developing national competitive power on the world stage. Realizing this, the central government felt the need to introduce this "international" notion to Chinese public education, to elaborate it and advocate it. This can be seen as a more direct reason why the MOE initiates and funds research projects on China's framework of key-competences for the different stages of student development. Meanwhile, in practice, the MOE makes a great endeavor to configure competences in educational processes and to transform competences into curriculum, in the hope that this reform will bring about educational "products" that are characterized by key-competences.

It is in this policy context that many researches and practical explorations on the key-competences-based education have sprung up all over the country in the past few years. Perhaps the most prominent research project funded by the MOE on this mode of education in recent years is an ambitious project carried out by a team at Beijing Normal University. It is titled as *A Research on the General Framework of Core-Competences of Students at the Stages of the Basic Education and the Higher Education*. Starting in 2013, this project was completed in 2016 by producing a framework of competences titled *Developing Chinese Students' Core-Competences* (Project Team for Core-Competences, 2016, pp. 1–3). This framework is composed of three domains, namely, Cultural Foundation, Autonomous Development, and Social Participation. There are six categories of core-competences altogether in these three domains, including humanistic attainment, scientific spirits, learning to learn, healthy living, responsibility, and practice with creativity. Each category of core-competences includes three basic points in which a large number of indicators are listed respectively (for details about this, see Wang, 2019). Immediately after this, China's MOE introduced this framework into the new round of curriculum reform in order to actualize key-competences.

### **Current discussions on key-competences-based education in China**

As shown above, the current movement toward key-competences-based education in China is actually a result of the merging of China's persistent goal of educating the all-round person and a current response to a global imperative for qualified human capital in the 21st century. Alongside this top-down movement, there appears a wide discussion in Chinese educational circles on the pros and cons of the localized reception of the concept of competence input from the international world.

Among those who take optimistic views, some argue that this mode of education will improve the overall quality of Chinese citizens and strengthen the competitive power of the state at the

international stage in the 21st century (e.g., Chu, 2016; Lin, 2017; Zhang, 2016a). Some believe that the framework of China's key-competences-based education has offered a localized description of competences that are essential for the Chinese younger generations within Chinese society, giving holistic attentions to the well-being of the young children, including not only psychological, social, and civic competences that are essential for the globalized economic world, but also Chinese political, traditional cultural, and moral competences (e.g., Lin, 2017). And some regard the idea of key-competences-based education as the driving force for China's current basic education curriculum reform (e.g., Gu, 2015), or claim it as both the starting point and the goal of the curriculum reform (e.g., Zhang, 2016b). It is also considered as a great opportunity to reorganize the principles of textbook compiling, that is, moving from the knowledge-based to the competences-based (Peng & Zhang, 2016), or that it offers greater value to the future conception of teaching (O. Shi, 2016).

However, many critical views on this mode of education also came before the public. For example, Ding (2018) listed 50 deficits of *The Framework of Developing Chinese Students' Core-Competences*. Cui (2016a) and Xin (2016) pointed out that the conception of *Suyang* (Chinese way of speaking about competence) still needs more clarification and elaboration. Ma and Li (2018) wrote a critical analysis on the boundaries and limitations of *Core-Suyang* through a comparison of Chinese framing of competences with its "international" counterparts. Shi (2016) and Xin (2016) both raise important issues concerning the relationship between core-competences and the concept of "subject core-competences" that is fabricated in China.

Two important issues are salient in the landscape of the criticisms. One is regarding the understanding of the concept of competences in Chinese context; the other is about how competence as an educational concept is implemented through the curriculum and teaching. However, the conceptual and implementing issues concerning competences-based education are mainly discussed on their own right, rather than connecting them to the idea of educating for wholeness. Furthermore, the connection between key-competences-based education and educating for wholeness needs a deep analysis of the role of competence in broader educational purpose for wholeness.

### **Challenges to key-competences-based education in China: Concept, curriculum, and subjectification**

Although the emergent conceptual and practical issues of key-competences-based education in China have recently come into view, they need further analysis in relation to educating for wholeness. This is not least because the central aim of key-competences-based education in China is to educate the whole person, or in Chinese discourse, the all-round developed person, which is put as the core of *The Framework of Developing Chinese Students' Core-Competences*. As I will show,



the issues contained in the Chinese concept of competences lead to important issues in teaching practices and curriculum design, all of which have to be addressed by rethinking the question of educational purpose in terms of educating for wholeness.

### *The dilemma between Core-Suyang and the education for all-round development of the young*

The first emerging challenge is how to define the concept of competence in a Chinese context. China has localized international versions of this concept and names the localized concept as *Suyang* (素养). In the Chinese language, *Suyang* literally stresses the level of knowledge and morality, but has less meaning regarding the *ability to do something*, or *capacity to fulfill a kind of task*, which the word competence mainly refers to. Furthermore, Chinese scholars define *Suyang* as “necessary characters and key abilities that students should possess” which also extends the meaning of *Suyang* in Chinese. However, when they retranslate *Suyang* into English, they still use the term “competences” to express it, which puts both Chinese teachers and international colleagues in confusion.

In localizing the concept of competences, although many contents and methods in foreign versions of the concept are taken up by Chinese educational researchers, some are also “filtered out” by them, which raises important questions regarding the curriculum design, as I will show in the next section. But the most remarkable aspect of localizing is that many “local competences” are added to the Chinese framework of competences, such as Chinese political, moral, and traditional culture competences, based on the assumption that they all constitute the central ideal of what it means to be the all-round developed person. In order to reflect educational ideal of the all-round person, the *Core-Suyang* framework seems to accommodate so many things that it is difficult to see what is not included in it. Here, the problem is that the concept *Core-Suyang* is supposed to focus on the indispensable or essential *Suyang* items, which should be small in number, but in reality it includes a large number of *Suyang* items. But to be closer to its central mission of educating for “all-round developed person,” the framework of *Core-Suyang* seems to have to increase a large number of competence items. Then, there is a dilemma between the concept of “*Core-Suyang*” and the ideal of “all-round developed person.” Thus, the challenging questions that are relevant here are: Why some competences constitute an all-round developed person, but not other competences? To what extent a list of competences can be equated with the idea of the all-round developed person? Whether the idea of wholeness of a person *in terms of* core-competences has no issues at all? Is it still possible to think about what it means to be an all-round developed person outside the “common sense” of core-competences?

By adding more items to the competences list, there appears not only conceptual tension in relation to the concept of core-competences but also practical issues in teaching. If the number of core-competences cannot cover all aspects of wholeness of a person, and hence it is allowed to continue to increase the number of competence items, then it can only lead to imposing more

heavy burdens on teachers and students, particularly when these competences are designed into school curriculum in a top-down manner.

This also leads to some problems regarding teaching. When the long list of prescribed competence items are transformed into a large number of detailed curriculum and teaching objectives, there is little space left for teachers' professional judgment concerning what is educationally desirable in a particular educational situation. Teaching by simply focusing on and sticking to a long list of competence items does not always work for every student in every time and place, therefore teachers' reflections and professional judgments are always needed. With little space for teachers' engagement in professional judgment about teaching practice, a fragmented teaching process is very likely to take place and hence threatens the educating for wholeness.

Yet, by cutting down or "filtering out" some contents or methods of international versions of core-competences are not without problems. This can be seen particularly in terms of curriculum design which I will discuss in detail in the next section. The further relevant question is, as core-competences are articulated as standardized items, and so, no matter how many competences are included or excluded, can this mode of education cultivate *subjectivity*? Above all, how to define and articulate "core-competences" within a Chinese context is a real challenge to this mode of education.

### *The limitations of "subject core-competences"*

To actualize the concept of core-competences in educational practice, core-competences descriptions have to be carried out through the school curriculum. This raises questions concerning how to transform the list of competences into a curriculum, how to teach competences, and how to evaluate competences. In the new round of curriculum reform, all these are challenging questions that Chinese educators and curriculum researchers have to engage in.

In January 2018, the *Curriculum Scheme of High School Education (2017 edition)* (MOE, 2018a) that highlights "Core-Suyang/competences" was initiated. One of the seminal designs in this scheme is the introduction of the idea of "*subject Core-Suyang/competences*" (学科核心素养), that is, "the positive values, crucial characters, and key skills that students acquire in learning *each* subject" (Zhong & Cui, 2018 cited in Wang, 2019, emphasis added). It is also formulated as "*disciplinary key-competences*," which means "advanced ability and human ability to resolve complicated problems by using disciplinary ideas and through disciplinary practices, so as to adapt oneself to the demands of information civilization and the challenges of future societies" (Zhang, 2019, p. 56). Both interpretations seem to stress the significant role of the individual subject or discipline in developing competences (see the curriculum scheme, 2017 edition). This is somewhat different from the cross-disciplinary approach to core-competences-based education stressed by many "international" versions.

According to the *Curriculum Scheme of High School Education (2017 edition)* (MOE, 2018a) and the *Curriculum Standards of High School Education (2017 edition)* (MOE, 2018b), the standards of each subject have “encapsulated subject core-competences based on the nature of each subject” (MOE, 2018a, p. 4; MOE, 2018b, p. 4; see also Ma & Li, 2018, p. 36). In other words, the new curriculum scheme and standards stress that each school subject corresponds to particular competences that are closely connected to itself. For each subject, there are several core-competences, and each subject core-competence is further divided into several levels of competence performance indicators, and all indicators amount to standards on the list for the evaluation of learning performances/outcomes.

This design is surely a great step to transform core-competences into school curriculum and teaching practice. However, it is to a large extent based on the nature of each subject, hence a limitation for an integrated way of learning or practical problem-solving in a real situation, for example, through a cross-disciplinary approach, or project-based learning approach, which has been designed in many “international” versions of key-competences. The current design seems to be a bit more “subject-based” than “competence-based.” Given that each subject might only be conducive to the development of certain competence(s), and if there is little communication between subjects, it will lead to discrete competences based on different subjects. Although the scheme claims that the Three-Dimensional Objective still works and becomes more integrated than before, the design of subject core-competences seems to largely ruin the holistic educational ambition of the key-competences-based education, and is therefore a real challenge to educating for the whole person.

British educational sociologist Basil Bernstein uses the concept of *classification* to analyze two types of curriculum codes and uses the concept of *framing* to analyze pedagogical discourse. While classification refers to “the degree of boundary maintenance between contents” (Bernstein, 1973a, p. 205; 1973b, p. 88), framing refers to “the degree of control teacher and pupil possess over the selection, sequencing, pacing and evaluation of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship” (Bernstein, 1975, p. 88). Hence, for Bernstein, both classification and framing can be described as being strong or weak. *Strong classification* means that boundaries are explicit and categories are insulated from one another, which is used by Bernstein to describe what he calls “collection code” of curriculum. *Weak classification* means that boundaries are blurred and integration exists, which he uses to describe what he calls “integrated code” of curriculum. Regarding the concept of framing, while *strong framing* suggests that students have less control over selection, sequencing, pacing, and evaluation of subject matters, *weak framing* implies that students have more freedom in those aspects. Shown from this perspective, the design of subject core-competences appears to undermine what Bernstein calls the “integrated code” of curriculum, which is a weakly classified curriculum and integrated organization of knowledge. The

long list of evaluative indicators and different levels of subject core-competences seems to be a kind of “strong framing,” and students seem to have limited options in the educational process, hence a hindrance for a holistic education.

If we look at this design from the other end of spectrum, that is, from the perspective of competence, rather than from the nature of subject, or if we start from the idea that the development of a particular competence should or could be contributed by *each* subject, there is still an important issue to deal with. It could be very challenging and even mismatched if *every* single subject is required to be taught and learned in order to develop a particular kind of core-competence. We all know that some subjects are not appropriate or have limitation(s) in developing a particular kind of competence. It can only make sense when we see a particular kind of competence as an outcome contributed by the teaching and learning of one subject or several subjects, but not by *each* subject. In this regard, the question of which competence development can be contributed by which subject(s) still needs to be dealt with.

### *A lack of subjectification as an educational purpose*

The emergence of the dilemma between *Core-Suyang* education and educating for the all-round person, and the limitations of subject core-competences, to some extent, all are connected to our assumption of purpose of key-competences-based education as an education for wholeness. However, the challenging question at stake here is whether the purpose of whole person education can and should simply be understood from the perspective of core-competences-based education, or rather, it needs to be seen from a broader perspective. For this question, it is worth a deeper analysis.

On the one hand, the purpose of key-competences-based education in terms of educating for wholeness of a person is just one particular version of “holistic”—as many would label it in this way—educational purpose. In the project report titled *Developing Chinese Students’ Core-Competences*, the concept of competence, or *Suyang* in Chinese, is defined as “necessary characters and key abilities that students should possess, in order to be able to adapt themselves to the needs of the lifelong and social development” (Project Team for Core-Competences, 2016, p. 1). Competences in this definition are read as specific contents or indicators of some particular educational objectives directed by a particular larger educational purpose, that is, for the adaptation to “the need of the lifelong and social development,” which is reminiscent of an OECD report titled *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society* (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). And in the direction of this particular purpose, competences are both contents and specific learning outcomes that can or should be achieved, or they are learning performance levels that can be measured. In a nutshell, competences are “something” that students are required to possess or acquire, and hence are *products* that can be produced by particular educational configuration and

particular educational arrangement for a particular educational purpose. Hence, key-competences themselves are not educational purposes in a broad sense, but are “contents” in a particular version of an educational purpose advocated at a particular historical stage.

On the other hand, the broad purpose of educating for wholeness of a person should not be simply understood through a particular educational mode, in this case, through key-competences-based education only, but need to be understood beyond this mode, and analyzed in a more *educational*, accurate, and encompassing language of educational purpose, and through this, key-competences-based mode of education can be put in a larger framework of rationales of education for evaluation. What helps me most in this way of looking at the purpose of education is Gert Biesta’s work.

When talking about good education, Biesta distinguishes three functions of good education based on rationales for education, that is, qualification, socialization, and subjectification, which partly overlap one another. Qualification “lies in the qualification of children, young people and adults. It lies in providing them with the knowledge, skills and understandings and often also with the dispositions and forms of judgment that allow them to ‘do something’ (Biesta, 2010, p. 20). Socialization function has to do with the many ways in which, through education, we become part of particular social, cultural, and political “orders” (p. 20). The subjectification function might perhaps best be understood as “the opposite of the socialization function” (p. 21).

Biesta then argues that these functions can be further regarded as three dimensions of the purpose of education when views about these functions need to be specified. He argues that the overlapping areas of the three dimensions of educational purpose can not only form synergy but also have potential for conflict between them. But unlike many who regard education simply as qualification and socialization, Biesta particularly distinguishes subjectification from socialization, arguing that “it (subjectification) is precisely *not* about the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing orders, but about ways of being that hint at independence from such orders, ways of being in which the individual is not simply a ‘specimen’ of a more encompassing order” (p. 21). For Biesta, “subjectification should be an intrinsic element of all education worthy of the name” and he even states that “education becomes uneducational if it only focuses on socialization” (p. 75). He mentioned that many philosophers of education in history have argued that “any education worthy of its name should always contribute to processes of subjectification that allow those educated to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting” (p. 21).

However, unlike those who understand subjectification in terms of developing certain competences, something that students can possess or obtain through learning, Biesta, mainly inspired by Levinas, puts forward the notion of subjectivity in terms of *event*, that is, subjectivity emerged from an encounter between students and what/who is other. It is therefore subjectivity in an ethical sense emerging from our ways of responding to others in an event of encounter, but not

subjectivity in terms of “thing.” This subjectivity may or may not occur, but it definitely *cannot* be produced by education in a methodically designed way, as a thing that can be possessed or acquired. For Biesta, subjectification can be understood in terms of an educational task that “consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is *as subject*” (Biesta, 2017, p. 7, emphasis original), and “grown-up way acknowledges the alterity and integrity of what and who is other, whereas in the non-grown-up way this is not ‘on the radar’”(p. 8). Hence, teaching in terms of subjectification is about “creating a space ... where students can encounter their freedom, can encounter the very thing that ‘nobody can do in my place’” (p. 98). He therefore writes, “[t]hat is why teaching, if it aimed at grown-up freedom, at the existence of the student as subject, not object, ‘operates’ as dissensus—not (just) building up their capacities and capabilities but turning students towards their freedom towards this impossible possibility (Derrida), the possibility that cannot be foreseen as a possibility, of existing in the world as subject” (p. 98). Thus, Biesta argues that teachers should teach beyond competence (Biesta, 2017, p. 90). Subjectification therefore requires education not to merely produce and reproduce what can be performed, seen, and measured, but to *open to what cannot be seen as the possible*, and to help a student exist as a subject in and with a world (both natural and social) in a responsible way.

Shown in Biesta’s encompassing framework of educational purpose, it is not difficult to see that key-competences-based education in China mainly focuses on the dimensions of qualification and socialization, but less on subjectification. In other words, the rationales relevant to key-competences-based education are largely given from outside of education, that is, for the aims of fulfilling social, economical, cultural, or political agenda or adjusting to the external changes, rather than giving the educational interest itself in term of subjectification an important place. Although some competences, for example, “learning to learn,” “critical thinking,” and “living for well-being,” seem to be relevant to the education for subjectivity, they are actually the “things” that students are required to have or possess, that is, *something* that one can master so as to improve learners’ agency (Biesta, 2017). It is not about *subjectness* existing in and with the world through subjectification that occurs in an encounter, comes from an opportunity, and emerges from a relationship, in which children can exist and act in a responsible way as subject.

## **Conclusion: Education beyond competence**

In this article, I have given a brief account of the emergence of a new discourse of key-competences-based education at a global level within the last few decades, and have regarded the idea of competence as new mantra of education in our age. I also have presented a short history of the education for all-round development of the young in China from the 1950s to the present. Against this background, I conducted an analysis of the rise of key-competences-based education

in China in the past few years, revealing that it is a result of the merging of two things: It is a current endeavor toward the consistent educational purpose of Chinese educational authority, that is, to educate for the all-round developed person, and it is also a governmental response to a global imperative, aimed at educating for the people who will be able to function successfully in our age filled with new information and technology, and who can contribute to the competitiveness of the national power at the world stage. I then argued that the key-competences-based education in China faces three important challenges: the dilemma between *Core-Suyang* and the education for all-round development of the young, the limitations in the design of subject core-competences, and finally a lack of subjectification in terms of the purpose of education.

So how might Chinese educational practitioners, researchers, and policymakers deal with these challenges? To overcome the first challenge, probably more work needs to be done to define the concept of competence/*Suyang*, with a more precise formulation in the Chinese language and an awareness of the limits of the concept of competence in terms of defining what it means to be human. For the second challenge, probably adjusting bit by bit the current curriculum design according to the Chinese situation while looking for more international experience in other parts of the world could be a way out from current troubling situation. As for the third challenge, perhaps it is not a matter about overcoming, but a question about keeping a more encompassing purpose of education in our mind. Teaching and curriculum with mere focus on a list of key-competences not only excludes non-key-competences but also excludes something unforeseen and unknown in the process of educational adventure. It is therefore suggested that a holistic education needs to be understood from a dynamic view of purpose(s) of education, in which the education for subjectification is at stake in the educational endeavor. While it could be a positive move from teaching knowledge and skills toward teaching competences in terms of education for wholeness of a person, we should not forget that we also need to educate beyond competence, if we keep an interest in the purpose of education as subjectification, the education worthy of the name. Whereas Biesta sheds light on the possibility that cannot be foreseen as a possibility, Bernstein offers us insights to create space and opportunity to call it into being through a more open design of the curriculum and pedagogy.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank reviewers from Boston College for their insightful suggestions to the first draft of this article, and also thank two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments on the manuscript of this article.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Note

1. It appears to be a bit different from the Western idea of holistic education which, for example, often includes spiritual education. The Chinese official version of educating for wholeness is a result of Chinese contemporary history, and developed in specific sociopolitical situations, but this does not mean that no different modes of education exist outside public education.

## References

- Bernstein, B. (1973a). *Class, codes and control* (Vol. 1). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bernstein, B. (1973b). *Class, codes and control* (Vol. 2). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bernstein, B. (1975). *Class, codes and control* (Vol. 3). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Biesta, G. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G. (2013). *The beautiful risk of education*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta, G. (2017). *The rediscovery of teaching*. Routledge.
- Chu, H. (2016). The international perspective and China's stance of key competencies—The enhancement of national qualities and the transformation of educational goals in 21st century in China [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, (11), 8–18.
- Cui, Y. (2016a). Core-competences: A fascinating and troubled concept [in Chinese]. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, (1), 3–5.
- Cui, Y. (2016b). Probing on key competencies [in Chinese]. *Global Education*, (5), 3–10.
- Deakin, R. (2008). Key competencies for education in a European context. *European Educational Research Journal*, 7(3), 311–318.
- Ding, N. (2018). Fifty deficits of research outcome of “developing Chinese students’ key-competences.” [in Chinese]. *Journal of Educational Development*, (1), 5–11.
- Gibb, T. (2008). Bridging Canadian adult second language education and essential skills policies. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 58(4), 318–334.
- Gordon, J., Halász, G., Krawczyk, M., Leney, T., Michel, A., Pepper, D., Putkiewicz, E., & Wiśniewski, J. (2009). Key competences in Europe: Opening doors for lifelong learners across the school curriculum and teacher education (2009). *CASE Network Reports No. 87*. Available at SRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1517804> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1517804>
- Gu, M. (2015). Core competences: The driving force of curriculum reform [in Chinese]. *People's Education*, (13), 17–18.
- Korthagen, F. A. J. (2004). In search of the essence of a good teacher: Towards a more holistic approach in teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20(1), 77–97.
- Lin, C. (2017). To construct sinicized core-competencies and values for student development [in Chinese]. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science)*, (1), 66–73.
- Ma, J., & Li, Y. (2018). The boundaries and limitations of key-competences: A comparative analysis [in Chinese]. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Science)*, (3), 28–40.



- Mao, H. (2018). From quality education to key competencies: China's practical and theoretical transcendence of the education for all-round development of the young [in Chinese]. *Journal of National Academy of Education Administration*, (3), 44–49.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (1999). *The State Council's decision to deepen educational reform and promote thoroughly quality education* [in Chinese]. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/moe\\_177/tnull\\_2478.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_sjzl/moe_177/tnull_2478.html)
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2001). *Outlines of curriculum reform in basic education* [in Chinese]. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from [http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_309/200412/4672.html](http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_309/200412/4672.html)
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2014). *The MOE's suggestions on deepening curriculum reform thoroughly and realizing the basic task of building moral character and cultivating humanity* [in Chinese]. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from <http://old.moe.gov.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/s7054/201404/167226.html>
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2018a). *Curriculum scheme of high school education (2017 edition)* [in Chinese]. People's Education Press.
- Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China. (2018b). *Curriculum standards of high school education (2017 edition)* [in Chinese]. People's Education Press.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2005). *The definition and selection of key competencies* [Executive Summary]. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/35070367.pdf>
- Partnership for 21st Century Skills. (2005). *Framework for 21st century learning*. Retrieved January 21, 2020, from [http://static.battelleforkids.org/documents/p21/P21\\_Framework\\_Brief.pdf](http://static.battelleforkids.org/documents/p21/P21_Framework_Brief.pdf)
- Peng, S., & Zhang, Z. (2016). From disciplinary knowledge to key-competence: The conversion of textbook compiling philosophy with the change of times [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, (12), 106–111.
- Project Team for Core-Competences. (2016). Developing Chinese students' core-competences [in Chinese]. *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education*, (10), 1–3.
- Ruan, C. (2019). Educational pathways for the cultivation of new talents in new China over the past 70 years [in Chinese]. *Educational Research*, (8), 15–23.
- Rychen, S., & Salganik, L. (Eds.) (2003). *Key competencies for a successful life and a well-functioning society*. Hogrefe & Huber.
- Shi, O. (2016). Curriculum and teaching values of core-competences [in Chinese]. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, (1), 9–11.
- Shi, Z. (2019). 70 years' exploration of the problem of "what kind of person should be cultivated" [in Chinese]. *Journal of the Chinese Society of Education*, (1), 51–57.
- Shirley, D. (2016). *The new imperatives of educational change: Achievement with integrity*. Routledge.
- State Education Commission of the People's Republic of China. (1997). *Some suggestions on active promotion of implementation of quality education in the primary and secondary schools in the current period* [in Chinese]. Retrieved February 21, 2020, from <http://www.chinalawedu.com/falvfagui/fg22598/21092.shtml>
- Stefan, H. (2007). Restrained teaching. *European Educational Research Journal*, 6(2), 109–124.

- Tong, H., Gao, H., & Tan, F. (2018). From “holistic education” to “all-round development” [in Chinese]. *Journal of Moral Education for Primary and Secondary School*, (12), 8–13.
- Tröhler, D. (2011). *Languages of education*. Routledge.
- UIS & CUE. (2013). *Towards universal learning: What every child should learn*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.
- Wang, T. (2019). Competence for student’s future: Curriculum change and policy redesign in China. *ECNU Review of Education*, 2(2), 234–245.
- Willbergh, I. (2015). The problems of ‘competence’ and alternatives from the Scandinavian perspective of *Bildung*. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(3), 335.
- Xin, T. (2016). Several problems of developing Chinese students’ key-competences [in Chinese]. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, (1), 6–7.
- Zhang, H. (2016a). Core-competences and “restarting” of basic education curriculum reform in our country [in Chinese]. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, (1), 7–9.
- Zhang, H. (2016b). On the connotations of key-competence [in Chinese]. *Global Education*, (4), 10–24.
- Zhang, H. (2019). On disciplinary key-competences [in Chinese]. *Journal of East China Normal University (Educational Sciences)*, (1), 55–65.
- Zhao, K. (2016). On competence-based teacher educational thought in contemporary Western world: Retrospect, trend and reflection [in Chinese]. *Primary & Secondary Schooling Abroad*, (3), 39–45.
- Zhong, Q., & Cui, Y. (2018). *Research on core-competencies* [in Chinese]. East China Normal University Press.