Research on Teacher Educational Discipline from the Perspective of Lacan's Theory of the Mirror

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Abstract: One of the reasons for the current difficulties in educational discipline is the lack of understanding of the status and significance of educational discipline in the student agency development process. Starting from mirror theory, current educational discipline presents three problems: students' loss of self in teachers' cognitive mirrors, the absence of subjectivity in teachers' domains, and the vanishing of students in teachers' gaze. Therefore, teachers should reconstruct cognitive mirrors, coexist with students through dialogue, and establish a virtue-based principle of educational discipline.

Keywords: educational discipline; theory of the mirror; teacher-student relationship

1. Introduction

In practice, educational discipline has always been a sensitive topic. On the one hand, with the progress of society and education in China, the humanistic education movement has become popular, and people's attitude towards educational discipline has shifted from support in the past to doubt and suspicion about teachers' disciplinary actions. At the same time, incidents of student harm caused by improper educational discipline have also occurred frequently, and there is also a pervasive atmosphere of "not daring to discipline and not knowing how to discipline" within the teacher community. On the other hand, the unique educational value of discipline cannot be overlooked. Since education became a conscious social activity of human beings, discipline has existed as an educational means and measure with unique value. Representative educators in the history of education have all paid more or less attention to educational discipline. Facing the current situation of "not daring to discipline and not knowing how to discipline" among the teacher community, besides the improper discipline caused by the low quality of some teachers, some scholars believe that it is due to the lack of legal basis for the current teacher's disciplinary power, resulting in one hand in the doubts of parents and students about the legitimacy of teacher's discipline, making teachers "not dare to discipline"[1]. On the other hand, teacher's discipline also lacks necessary clear norms and guidance, and incidents of corporal punishment and excessive punishment occur from time to time.

It is in this context that the Ministry of Education issued the "Primary and Secondary Education Discipline Rules (Trial)" in 2021, which specifies in detail the main implementers and their status, implementation principles, and implementation norms of educational discipline, taking a milestone step to address the issue of educational discipline. However, educational discipline is ultimately an educational issue, and relying solely on laws and regulations may alienate both teacher-student relationships and discipline rules themselves[2]. More paradoxically, some cases of educational discipline, even though compliant with laws and regulations, have also caused serious accidents, such as a primary school student in Jiujiang, Jiangxi Province, who jumped to his death after being verbally criticized by his homeroom teacher for not completing his homework in November 2021, and a junior high school student in Hengyang, Hunan Province, who committed suicide by taking pills with his classmates after his grades declined in 2018[3,4]. In these cases, teachers did not adopt harsh punishment measures, but only verbally criticized the students, which directly led to the occurrence of accidents. Why does a teacher's criticism cause such a great harm to students? In other words, what is the role and status of educational discipline in the development process of students? In this regard, the famous French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan constructed a unique personal subject theory - "mirror theory" - around the formation and alienation of the subject, providing a theoretical tool for us to understand the role and status of educational discipline in the development process of students.

2. Self as Other

2.1 Genetic analysis of the formation of the subject

Lacan drew on Wallon's experiment on the different reactions of 6-month-old infants and chimpanzees to seeing their images in the mirror - infants show interest and interact with the image in the mirror while chimpanzees do not - and proposed the famous "mirror stage" theory. Contrary to psychologists who explain the difference between the two as "a certain behavioral pattern of an intelligent being responding to and cognizing the surrounding environment", Lacan believes that infants cannot be presumed to be "the existence of an experiential, cognitive, self-sufficient subject"[5]. During the first six months after birth, infants are in the pre-mirror stage, when chaos has not yet opened and the subject has not yet emerged, nor can they distinguish between me and non-me. At six to eighteen months, infants' physiological functions further develop, their bodies have preliminary mobility, they can crawl and sit up, and the world begins to become three-dimensional. They show great interest when faced with their own image in the mirror, which Lacan calls "an identification". It is the self-construction of the empty subject through the appreciation of the "self" image in the mirror and its suture with itself, thus integrating the fragmented body into a gestalt-like whole, making up for the defect of "human is a premature baby" and becoming the beginning of the formation of the subject. For Lacan, infants' identification with the mirror image is the way they construct an "ideal self" by projecting their libido onto the mirror. Identifying with the ideal self marks the formation of the subject and also means that the subject "mistakes" the image in the mirror, or the other, as itself, and thus wears the armor of alienation. As Lacan himself said, "The internal drive of the mirror stage… moves from deficiency to pre-determination… until a solid framework of alienated individuals is established, which, with its rigid structure, will affect the entire spiritual development."[6] Identifying with the mirror is also identifying with the other, and it is only through the identification with the other that the subject truly begins to form.

The identification with the image constructs the "ego", and the true formation of the subject is in the Oedipus stage after the age of about four, through the identification with the father and his image. It is specifically divided into three processes. First, it is the period of bilateral relationship between the child's identification and attachment to the mother. At this time, the child longs for the meticulous care and love of the mother to make up for the "eternal loss" after birth, and tries to become the desire of the mother's desire. But the child's desire for the mother always fails, because the father intervenes in the bilateral relationship between mother and child, and the father frustrates the child's desire for the mother and says "no" to the child. Only the father is the desire of the mother's desire, and the bilateral relationship between mother and child becomes a multilateral relationship between parent and child. At the end of the Oedipus stage, due to the suppression of the desire for the mother, the child has to bid farewell to the mother and identify with the father, taking the father as an example. On the contrary, if the subject fails to successfully complete this transformation process, it is a common sense of mental illness. In this regard, father and mother are a metaphor, where father refers to the social norms, customs, and habits manifested through symbolic symbols, and mother refers to the unconditional satisfaction of the subject's desires. Unlike Freud's personality structure of "superego, ego, id", Lacan's interpretation of the Oedipus stage aims to illustrate the fundamental lack of the existence of the subject on the one hand, and emphasizes the hetero-structural formation of the subject on the other hand, that is, the subject always lives in the other.

2.2 Synchronic topological structure of the subject formation

Lacan proposed that the formation of the subject lies in the synchronic topological movement of three domains - the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real - based on the "mirror stage". The operation between the three domains has no temporal or spatial difference, but is interlinked and overlapping.

The mirror stage is the concentrated manifestation of the imaginary domain, and therefore the imaginary domain is the first domain that the subject enters among the three domains. When a baby separates from its mother, the first thing it feels is anxiety about lack. This anxiety arises from the baby's discovery that it must rely on its mother or other subjects to meet its own needs, so this anxiety is not physical but psychological in nature. The physical "need" can be satisfied by specific substances, but the subject's anxiety about separation is psychological "demand". When the subject faces the image and identifies with it, it is through attachment and appreciation of the image to compensate for its own lack and separation rather than a simple reflection and replication of the image in and outside the mirror, that is, through the imaginative, fantasy, and illusory logic to construct an ideal self-image in the eyes

of others to overcome this essential psychological lack. By entering the imaginary domain, the subject lives in the place of the other in the image. The subject's self and world are built on the basis of its relationship with the image. The relationship between the subject and the image is actually a narcissistic relationship, longing to become an image that satisfies its own lack while also being able to become an image that satisfies others (the mother and the world)[7]. Libido circulates between self and image, which Lacan calls "a seesaw game". This process is "an unconscious self-deception relationship"[8]. This self-deception relationship brings about aggression. The accumulation of aggression is proportional to the degree of narcissism of the self. Confusing self and image, no matter which side wins, will embed alien factors into self. Aggression as a psychological intention of the subject. Aggression is a consequence of this psychological intention. And not necessarily directed at others, often just an attack on self.

The desperate struggle between the subject and its mirror image can only be temporarily alleviated by entering the symbolic domain, which is a mediating system based on linguistic symbols as the core signifier system. The symbolic domain provides a basic venue for verbal exchange between subjects. This also means that by stitching the signifier onto the subject, it can obtain a subjective position in the symbolic world. On this position, the subject can finally realize the difference between self and others. It is here that the true intersubjectivity can be established with the help of linguistic symbols. By exchanging words with others, mutual recognition and symbolic identification are achieved. But the three domains are not mutually opposed or contradictory. The linguistic symbol system itself is a huge magic mirror (or what Lacan called the "big Other"). The subject must recognize, enter, and internalize the linguistic symbol system in order to obtain a symbolic position and the recognition of other subjects - this is actually the recognition of the father image and the law. If the ideal self constructed by the subject through the imaginary domain is projected onto the external world, then the self ideal constructed through linguistic symbols and their structural dimension is the result of the subject projecting the external image inward. In this sense, the imaginary identification - namely the ideal self - is a mirror formed in response to the gaze of others. The symbolic identification - namely the self ideal - is already a gaze that looks at the self from the perspective of others, fixing their "demands" on itself. In this sense, people can speak, not because they can use linguistic symbols, but because linguistic symbols make people human.

However, the operation of the chain of signifiers in the symbolic domain cannot fully compensate and resolve the lack and anxiety of the subject. The physiological "need" expressed through linguistic symbols becomes psychological "demand", while the signifiers that are not grasped or omitted are "desire", circulating in the real domain. Therefore, the real domain first corresponds to the original needs of the chaotic state of human beings at the beginning, that is, returning to the "mythical state" of the mother body. Compared to the imaginary domain, the real domain is a traumatic core that exists but cannot be reached, a shore that always wants to return but never arrives. At the same time, because this need is a missing signifier that cannot be captured and satisfied, compared to the symbolic domain, the real domain appears in linguistic symbols but cannot be truly spoken of. In short, the real domain is an impossible "nothing", which is not a "nothing" relative to "something", but a capitalized, absolute nothing - its unknowability and impossibility can be compared to Kant's thing-in-itself. If the imaginary and symbolic domains prove the dimension of the subject's existence in others, then the real domain fundamentally reveals the impossibility of the subject's existence - the true self does not exist. Tang Songlin and others believe that the teaching strategy of "inaction" is actually a misunderstanding of Lacan's real domain[9]. It is a gap between the imaginary and symbolic domains, an unspeakable horror - the true self does not exist in it - shattering the subject's infatuation with the mirror image that compensates for the lack in the imaginary domain, and tearing apart the identity established by the subject entering the signifier network in the symbolic domain.

3. Different aspects of educational discipline

Educational discipline aims to achieve educational goals by causing physical and mental pain to students. It also presents different aspects in the three topological domains of subject formation.

3.1 Imaginary educational discipline - students' loss in teachers' cognitive mirror

Educational discipline includes both explicit and implicit violence against students by teachers' creation of a cognitive image of "good students". Under what circumstances do teachers often punish students? In fact, the scenarios of teachers' disciplinary behavior do not fully comply with the

disciplinary conditions stipulated in the "Rules" - teachers' punishment often occurs first on bad children rather than only targeting students' bad behavior. It is the judgment of teachers on students' bad habits and bad behavior that leads to subsequent punishment. Before becoming teachers, they have already gained certain social experience and formed certain cognitive images of "good students" based on their own growth experiences and educational and teaching practice activities. In order to gain advantages in evaluation and achieve the identity of themselves with the ideal teacher image, they will inevitably punish the so-called "underachieving" students who do not conform to their cognitive image of "good students" and the student behavior that impedes their identification with the perfect teacher image in the mirror. With the help of teachers' good student schema as a mirror intermediary, students can see their own insufficiency and lack in the other[10]. In order to compensate for the separation from others (i.e. teachers), students identify with teachers' ideal student image, devote themselves to it, and wear it as armor. For example, students willingly accept teachers' arbitrary commands and orders in order to cater to teachers and gain their recognition. For instance, in February 2021, a fifth-grade student in a primary school in Xinyu City, Jiangxi Province, chose to jump to his death before the start of school because of too much homework left by his teacher and not completing it[11]. Here, the teacher did not implement superficial and conventional disciplinary measures, but the excessive homework and the cognitive image of "good students must complete their homework" are not another kind of implicit violence? Another example is that in October 2018, a junior high school student in Hengyang City, Hunan Province, committed suicide by taking medication[12]. The direct reason was that her performance declined and she was verbally criticized by her homeroom teacher. In her suicide note, she wrote, "My pressure is too great… So I choose to give up life and end my own life." Therefore, it is not that students are really fragile and would die just because of one assignment or one criticism, but rather that it is caused by implicit educational violence.

3.2 Symbolic educational discipline - the loss of student subjectivity in the teacher's field

Of course, conventional educational discipline often consists of verbal or written criticism of students who have violated the rules, while symbolic educational discipline risks alienation by operating signifier chains that are stitched onto students to force them to acknowledge the "law" represented by adults such as teachers and schools. Taking the example of a self-criticism letter, writing it means requiring students who have made mistakes to dissect, analyze, and criticize themselves from the perspective of the larger Other, and to construct their ideal self using themselves as a negative example. Isn't it true that the most satisfactory ending of a self-criticism letter for teachers should be a heartfelt apology and a promise to correct and not repeat the mistake? Before writing the self-criticism letter, teachers often ask, "Why did you do that?" - implying what should be done while denying the student's current behavior. At this point, the student's answer is not important. No matter how the student argues, the teacher (or the larger Other) has actually given "me" a position in the symbolic order. By dividing out a "me" with signifiers and setting it against the Other, students have only two outcomes at this point: either they acknowledge the teacher's criticism and accept their position in the symbolic order (which actually means accepting the division of signifiers and becoming a deficient being), or they ignore the teacher's criticism and fail to become a qualified student. This is not a difference in psychological endurance between adults and children: In October 2021, a graduate student at Yan'an University died after being criticized by his supervisor for insufficient research output - the important thing is not the objective age difference, but the position of the subject in the symbolic order[13]. Even symbolic educational discipline is implicit. In order to overcome separation from the Other and to obtain the "conditional" love of the teacher, students must attach themselves to the signifier - which is actually their grades, scores, and rankings. The relationship between teachers and students, as well as between students themselves, is no longer a state of mutual love and progress, but instead a series of numbers and slogans such as "Increase by one point, kill thousands of people." At this point, students receive some kind of confirmation in the signifier chain, and the struggle between their ideal self and the self in the teacher's cognitive mirror is eased through the intervention of signifiers. However, this confirmation is not an affirmation and recognition of the essence of the student, but rather a result of the student's being in the educational signifier chain - that is, in the field of the Other - making them a deficient being who can never be recognized and accepted by the teacher in the symbolic order. In this sense, educational discipline is always incomplete and even a failure.

3.3 Real educational discipline - the disappearance of students in the teacher's gaze

The real world, as an impossible domain, is also the outcome of the contradictions and conflicts between the imaginary and symbolic worlds. When teachers use their own imaginative mirror cognition

to contrast students, educational discipline has a basis for departure. When teachers require students to recognize the symbolic order, educational discipline has a reference standard. When educational discipline actually occurs, what students need to overcome first is not the so-called mistakes and shortcomings, but the separation from the object - that is, the contradiction and conflict between the imaginative mirror identification and the actual position in the symbolic world. As mentioned above, the operation of the signifier chain in the symbolic world only delays the desire or anxiety of the subject, and cannot completely satisfy or eliminate it. It is from this perspective that educational discipline not only demands students but also pushes them into the abyss of the real world. In reality, especially in the present, teachers do not often punish students, and in order to avoid disputes, schools and teachers often determine various reward and punishment management methods in advance. In order to avoid being punished, students need to pay attention to their own words and deeds at all times. On the one hand, they must perform well, and on the other hand, they cannot break the rules. Even if they break the rules, they cannot be seen by others. At this point, the existence of the reward and punishment system is not only to point out the direction and define the boundaries for students' behavior, but also to incorporate them into the scope of observation of other subjects. This kind of observation from other subjects - in the imaginary world, it is the teacher's cognitive mirror image, and in the symbolic world, it is the self-ideal - also brings students endless anxiety and finds that this anxiety cannot be alleviated or even aggravated by satisfying the requirements of others. The result is to face the gaze of absolute "nothingness" in the real world, face their own fundamental deficiency, and ultimately disintegrate and dissipate the identity established in the imaginary and symbolic worlds. This is not to say that we oppose the reward and punishment system, which is necessary for human behavior to be constrained and guided. But we should pay attention to how hidden educational discipline observes the entire student population from the perspective of others, such as the annual media platforms and schools that vigorously promote the top high school students and outstanding models. The desire is constantly produced when the desire for "ranking first" is repeatedly frustrated, which leads to anxiety in students. It should be emphasized that this anxiety is not a question of "what should I do?" but a question of "what else can I do?!" It is in this anxiety that the identity of the subject is threatened and gradually dissipates.

4. Implementation of educational discipline

The implementation of educational discipline has two fundamental premises: first, the object of punishment does not meet the requirements of teachers, schools, and society for qualified students; second, the "pleasure principle" of pursuing happiness and rejecting pain, which can help them make up for their deficiencies by using punishment, a way of inflicting pain on the body and mind. However, what kind of "unqualified" is really unqualified? To borrow Marcuse's words, is the evaluation of students multidimensional or unidimensional? In addition, is the pleasure principle the only dimension of human existence? Are there any other dimensions?

4.1 From loss to verification: the transformation of teachers' cognitive mirrors in educational discipline to diversity

The reason why students get lost in teachers' cognitive mirrors is that teachers first form various single-dimensional perceptions of "good children" and "good students". Faced with this unidimensional cognitive mirror, students have to throw themselves into it and engage in a life-and-death struggle with their ideal selves, which manifests as the pressure of invisible educational discipline on students. It also causes students to project their ideal selves onto others and fall into the competition of the dark forest - this is obviously not the purpose of educational discipline. Therefore, teachers cannot but reflect on their own cognitive mirrors, that is, every student should be able to see diverse versions of themselves in teachers' cognitive mirrors, rather than blindly imposing a universal and narrow standard - it is obviously narrow to use a standard to universally measure all students - on students and requiring them to use it as a reference. This is not to say that there is no need to evaluate and punish students with the same standard, but to avoid students being dwarfed, narrowed, and even objectified in teachers' cognitive mirrors. In this sense, teachers should form a diverse cognitive mirror, so that each student can gain diverse selves and reduce the separation from others.

4.2 From absence to presence: dialogue and coexistence between teachers and students in educational discipline

The main reason for the absence of student subjectivity in educational discipline is that in the teacher's domain, it is always the teacher who speaks and lacks dialogue between the subjects of teachers and students. It is not the teacher but the student who should reflect on and correct their own behavior performance. Unlike the common practice of requiring students who make mistakes to write a self-criticism, Wei Shusheng once advocated changing the self-criticism to an "explanation", allowing students to describe a series of psychological changes when they make mistakes and discover the reasons for correcting them[14]. In the whole process, the teacher is not present as an external commander or legislator, and the student is not a prisoner waiting for the verdict on the court. On the contrary, the teacher should become a guide and supervisor for the student. Especially, the questions of why to be punished and what to do after being punished can only be answered by dialogue between teachers and students - only by entering the symbolic world and speaking can one be recognized as a subject. Freire emphasized that the premise of dialogue is to recognize the unfinished nature of human beings, and it includes reflection and action[15]. educational discipline is oriented towards the development of students, and it is also possible because of the unfinished nature of human beings. In this sense, through dialogue between teachers and students, students are able to name, recognize, and improve their own non-standard behaviors. It is through students' own reflection and action that their subjectivity is manifested.

4.3 From disappearance to presence: the principle of moral-based educational discipline

Education is aimed at the wholeness of the person, and "the purpose of education implies the enhancement of human health"[16]. In this sense, educational discipline cannot only emphasize the correction and improvement of students' non-standard behaviors, but should also be a bitter but effective medicine to promote the comprehensive development and physical and mental health of students. Therefore, educational discipline must go beyond the pleasure principle of the "stimulus-response" law of behaviorist psychology, and be based on morality, incorporating the respect for moral laws and principles into the entire process of educational discipline to avoid the risk of students' identity fragmentation. Being based on morality requires educational discipline to focus on students' non-standard behaviors while guiding them to face the lofty moral laws and principles, pursue the value of goodness, and stimulate students' sense of shame. It is manifested as the negation of higher-level values to lower-level values. In this process, rewards and punishments are only the means and ways to guide students to be good. Taking Tao Xingzhi's story of "three candies" as an example, Tao Xingzhi rewarded students with three candies in turn for their compliance with the agreement, respect for teachers, and chivalrous behavior. The other side of rewarding good character is the negation of the violent means used by students to redress injustice. The combination of rewards and punishments made students tearful without being criticized by Tao Xingzhi. Therefore, educational discipline should ultimately go beyond the pleasure principle and return to the fundamental value orientation of educating people under the guidance of morality.

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