

Promoting the Characteristic Development of General Senior High Schools through Diversified Courses

Xin Zheng*

Xi'an Middle School of Shaanxi Province, Xi'an 710018, Shaanxi, China

*Corresponding author: Xin Zheng, 424691542@qq.com

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Abstract: The construction of diversified courses is an important means to deepen curriculum and teaching reform in general senior high schools, meet the needs of students' comprehensive and individualized development, promote the professional growth of teachers, and highlight the characteristics of running schools. This paper divides the development of diversified courses in general senior high schools in China since the 1990s into three stages: preliminary exploration, standardization and enrichment, and system construction. It also focuses on objective analysis of the contents of the courses, the educational value, and the operational mechanism, and gives solutions to the problems at the present stage from the following aspects: implementation of the national curriculum program, optimization of the school-based characteristics of the courses, enhancement of the teachers' curricular literacy, improvement of the evaluation methods, and guidance for the development of the students. It provides practical ideas and methods for the current problems at this stage in five aspects: implementing the national curriculum program, optimizing the school-based characterized curriculum, improving teachers' curriculum literacy, improving evaluation methods, and integrating guidance for students' development.

Keywords: General senior high school; Diversified curriculum; Characterized development

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1. Introduction

The Opinions on Implementing the Action Plan for Expanding Quality and Improving Quality of Basic Education in the New Era (hereinafter referred to as the Opinions) proposes implementing an initiative for the connotative development of general senior high schools, promoting high-quality, characteristic, and diversified development, building a number of general senior high schools with characteristics in science and technology, humanities, foreign languages, physical education, and art, and actively developing comprehensive high schools^[1]. On how to achieve quality expansion and improvement in general senior high

schools, the Opinions states in its “Major Actions”: “Support a group of regions and schools with relatively good foundations to take the lead in carrying out pilot projects for characteristic school-running. On the basis of ensuring that compulsory courses are fully and effectively offered, adapt to students’ strengths, advantages, and development needs, provide tiered, categorized, rich, and diverse elective courses, form a curriculum series that reflects the school’s school-running characteristics, and play a demonstrative and leading role” [2]. This indicates that at the national level, curriculum construction is regarded as a breakthrough for guiding general senior high schools toward characteristic development, further clarifying the important role of curriculum construction in promoting high-quality school development and students’ comprehensive and individualized development.

2. The development process of curriculum diversification in China’s general senior high schools

Since China’s education management system is an education management model led by the central government, the national education administrative department is the most important force driving education and teaching reform. Promoted by a series of education reform policy documents, the curriculum construction of China’s general senior high schools has roughly gone through three stages.

2.1. Preliminary exploration stage (1990–1999)

In 1985, after convening the first National Education Work Conference since the reform and opening up, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Education System, established the State Education Commission (the predecessor of the Ministry of Education), and Li Peng, then Vice Premier of the State Council, concurrently served as the first director of the State Education Commission, launching various reforms in the education field in a “top-down” manner [3]. In 1990, the former State Education Commission began to implement senior high school curriculum reform, adjusted the curriculum structure, divided school curricula into two major categories—subject-based courses and activity-based courses—and required subject-based courses to take both compulsory and elective forms. It even encouraged localities and schools with the conditions to offer labor and technical courses and computer courses, so as to increase students’ learning choices and schools’ autonomy in running schools [4]. Although the curriculum reform at this stage was somewhat forward-looking and formed a relatively complete prototype of a curriculum program, constrained by the level of economic and social development, diversified courses did not emerge in large numbers.

2.2. Standardization and Enrichment Stage (2000–2013)

In June 1999, the Decision on Deepening Education Reform and Comprehensively Promoting Quality Education issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council proposed to “adjust and reform the curriculum system, structure, and content, establish a new basic education curriculum system, and trial national, local, and school curricula.” Since then, the three-level curriculum management system of national, local, and school curricula has continued to this day [5]. Entering the new century, the state intensively issued policy documents on promoting the characteristic development of general senior high schools. Some general senior high schools in economically developed areas took the lead, exploring the use of local history, culture, and resources to independently develop a series of characteristic

courses. However, due to the lack of systematic curriculum theory guidance and curriculum development experience, the overall quality of the courses was not high, and differences among regions and schools were relatively large.

2.3. System construction stage (2014–Present)

In April 2014, the Ministry of Education issued the Opinions on Comprehensively Deepening Curriculum Reform and Implementing the Fundamental Task of Fostering Virtue through Education, proposing to “research and formulate a core competencies system for student development and academic quality standards, revise curriculum programs and curriculum standards, and compile and revise relevant subject textbooks for universities, primary and secondary schools” ^[5]. In 2014, the comprehensive reform of the college entrance examination began piloting in Shanghai and Zhejiang; in September 2016, the research results on Core Competencies for Chinese Students’ Development were released; in December 2017, the Ministry of Education issued the Curriculum Program for General Senior High Schools and Curriculum Standards for Chinese and Other Subjects (2017 Edition); in 2020, the curriculum program and curriculum standards were revised again, and new editions of textbooks for various subjects were successively put into use. This marks that the national curriculum intention has been solidified in the form of textbooks, which is an important basis for senior high schools to implement the national curriculum in a school-based manner.

3. Current situation of curriculum diversification in China’s general senior high schools

In the more than ten years since the new round of comprehensive college entrance examination reform, five batches and a total of 29 provinces (municipalities and autonomous regions) have begun to implement the comprehensive college entrance examination reform (currently only Tibet and Xinjiang have not yet started the new college entrance examination reform) ^[6]. China’s general senior high schools have made considerable progress in meeting students’ differentiated growth needs through diversified curriculum construction and promoting the characteristic development of schools.

3.1. Course content is broad and complete

At the national curriculum level, the current curriculum program for general senior high schools stipulates a total of 14 courses and offers them at three levels—compulsory, selective compulsory, and elective—for students with different development directions to choose and study. Even for students taking the college entrance examination, both the “3+3” and “3+1+2” subject selection models grant students sufficient choice, and students’ right to comprehensive and individualized development is guaranteed. At the local curriculum level, some provinces and municipalities have issued Guidelines for the Development of Local Curriculum Textbooks, roughly covering different curriculum development directions such as distinctive regional culture, disciplinary thinking methods, learning science guidance, information literacy cultivation, scientific and technological invention and creation, and education for international understanding. At the school curriculum level, under the guidance of their own school-running philosophies, and based on actual school development and student growth needs, schools have deepened the supply-side reform of high-quality curricula and mostly developed school-based curricula with diverse forms and rich content.

3.2. Educational value is fully demonstrated

Under the three-level curriculum management system, China's general senior high schools adhere to the simultaneous development of education in five domains, vigorously develop quality education, and integrate core socialist values and Core Competencies for Chinese Students' Development into the entire process of curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation. In curriculum development, the revision of national curriculum programs, compilation of new textbooks, and development of local and school curricula all reconstruct learning content based on subject core competencies, consolidating the foundation for building a high-quality curriculum system. In curriculum implementation, new teaching and learning methods such as large-unit teaching, subject-based ideological and political education, interdisciplinary learning, project-based learning, thematic learning, and inquiry-based learning are vigorously promoted. In curriculum evaluation, classroom teaching evaluation standards and indicator systems aimed at cultivating students' core competencies are carefully designed, making evaluation standards more operational and further enhancing frontline educators' sense of principal responsibility for diagnosing and optimizing classroom problems.

3.3. Operating mechanisms are efficient and orderly

Curriculum reform is a long-term and systematic project involving multiple subjects. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the reform of "streamlining administration, delegating power, improving regulation, and upgrading services" in the education field has taken "streamlining administration and delegating power," "combining decentralization with regulation," and "improving services" as its main levers, effectively stimulating the vitality of education administrative departments and the endogenous impetus for the development of general senior high schools. In schools renowned for curriculum construction, the strength of the entire subject group is generally concentrated, changing "fighting alone" into "joint operations": subject experts plan curriculum directions, backbone teachers complete curriculum development, teams collaborate to implement teaching, and school teaching departments (some schools have established curriculum construction steering committees) conduct curriculum evaluation, thereby ensuring curriculum quality to the greatest extent.

4. Prospects for promoting the characteristic development of general senior high schools through curriculum construction

With the implementation of the comprehensive college entrance examination reform, China's general senior high school curriculum construction has delivered solid results, characteristic development has taken firm strides, and both theoretical research and practical exploration have yielded fruitful outcomes. However, it cannot be denied that, due to the inertia of past policy implementation, some general senior high schools still one-sidedly pursue enrollment rates, with an obvious tendency toward "uniformity across schools and curricula" and few distinctive features. Therefore, building a curriculum system that has the school's own characteristics, is available for students to choose and study, and meets students' individualized development needs, and promoting the characteristic development of general senior high schools through diversified courses, is a direction that all school-running entities must strive toward at present and in the period ahead.

4.1. Strictly implementing the national curriculum program

The national curriculum program is the general outline of curriculum reform and the blueprint for

curriculum-based education. It emphasizes a common foundation and is a programmatic document that every school must implement without compromise in deepening curriculum and teaching reform. Under the current examination and evaluation system, all schools attach great importance to college entrance examination subjects and proficiency examination subjects. For subjects that some schools often handle flexibly, such as Technology (Information Technology, General Technology), Arts (Music, Fine Arts), Physical Education and Health, Comprehensive Practice (inquiry-based learning, Party and Youth League activities, military training, social investigation, etc.), and Labor, teaching management models must be innovated and clear course-offering requirements must be put forward.

4.2. Continuously optimizing school-based characteristic courses

Although most schools offer school-based characteristic courses, the school-based courses they offer still have prominent problems that need to be solved urgently. These mainly include: some elective courses are offered rather arbitrarily; the vast majority of elective courses have no syllabus; some elective courses can only be regarded as a subject activity and cannot be called a course; credit system management regulations are not strictly implemented; and courses such as social practice and volunteer service lack necessary assessment and evaluation systems. To solve these problems, first, top-level design should be done well, and university curriculum experts should be introduced into the organizational structure of curriculum construction, so that school curriculum development can move away from the “solo” of a single discipline or an individual teacher and give rise to three-dimensional and systematic structural reform. Second, iterative development should be adhered to, and curriculum content should be adjusted in a timely manner according to changes in student source quality and the teaching environment, with continuous optimization and improvement. Finally, credit management regulations should be strictly implemented, and, relying on the provincial “Comprehensive Quality Evaluation Information Management System for General Senior High School Students,” process outcomes should be uploaded, and online credit recognition should be realized.

4.3. Vigorously enhancing teachers’ curriculum literacy

Curriculum and teaching reform includes two aspects: first, building high-quality curricula; second, implementing curricula with high quality. Teachers are the most critical factor determining the quality of curriculum implementation, and efforts should be made to transform the vision of curriculum implementation into teachers’ teaching actions. Therefore, when planning the curriculum system, actions to enhance teachers’ curriculum literacy must be simultaneously supported. First, in various types and levels of training, special training should be strengthened for teachers in curriculum development, curriculum implementation, teaching evaluation, and digital literacy. Second, leveraging the online teaching research section of the National Smart Education Platform for Primary and Secondary Schools, activities should be carried out to share excellent cases of curriculum construction and exchange typical experiences. Third, adherence to open schooling should be maintained, and reforms in teaching management systems—such as excellent courses and backbone teachers teaching across schools—should be encouraged within education consortia and education groups, promoting the co-construction and sharing of high-quality curriculum resources.

4.4. Improving teaching evaluation methods and approaches

According to the curriculum program, students who complete the study of the prescribed class hours for the corresponding course and pass the examination (assessment) can obtain the corresponding credits. Schools

should improve process-based evaluation and, according to students' actual situations, define the weighting proportions for study time, classroom performance, assignment quality, regular quizzes, and summative evaluation (examination or assessment). They should refine the evaluation standards for inquiry-based learning, social practice, and volunteer service, and set differentiated evaluation indicators such as papers, research reports, problem-solving plans, activity designs, physical designs, multimedia courseware, diaries, service reflections, and video materials according to course content. They should pilot an exemption-from-study-and-examination system. Students who, during senior high school, participate in national competitions for primary and secondary school students designated by the Ministry of Education or other subject competitions recognized by provincial education authorities and win third prize or above may apply to the school for exemption from part or all of the class hours of the compulsory modules of the corresponding subjects and for exemption from examinations.

4.5. Student development guidance throughout the whole process

In the new era, the development directions of general senior high schools can be roughly divided into four categories: comprehensively reformed high schools, subject-characteristic high schools, vocational-general integrated high schools, and international exchange high schools. To enable students and parents to understand the school's development direction and focus, and to help students establish a development path suitable for themselves, the student development guidance system must be fully implemented. In addition to providing guidance when students choose subjects, career planning courses should be offered throughout all three senior high school years, with full-process guidance implemented, and appointments with parents should also be accepted when necessary. At the same time, training for career planning teachers should be strengthened. In addition to psychological principles, psychological measurement and evaluation, and the current status and development trends of social occupations, the training content should also include the national curriculum program, the latest academic discipline and major setup in regular higher education by the Ministry of Education, the province's high school entrance examination policy, the college entrance examination system, the examination paper-setting arrangements of the province's education examinations authority, and the school's curriculum system.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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