

## On the Essence of Comprehensive Practical Activity Courses

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**Keywords:** Comprehensive practical activity courses; essence;intension and extension;function

**Abstract:** Since China's reform and opening up in 1949, different requirements for talents have forced reformation of education. Comprehensive practical activity curriculum should be generated and developed according to needs. However, the development of new things includes a process from immaturity to maturity. At present, there are still some problems that need to be further discussed, and essential discussion is the primary task for the development of integrated practical activity curriculum. Based on author's thinking, this paper discusses the essence of integrated practical activity curriculum.

### 1. Introduction

Curriculum is a kind of influence on people's psychology and physiology. There are two types of curriculum in human history, one is activity curriculum, and the other is subject curriculum. Both of them have had a positive impact in specific periods of human history development. As early as the ancient human society, there were primitive educational activities. Education was based on all kinds of labor activities related to production and life. The content of education was based of different kinds of production and life experiences related to real action. During the period of slave society thousands of years ago (the slave society time period was different in China and the West), China and the West coincided, that education gradually separated from life practice and became a speculative activity, with politics as its main object of service. This principle was obeyed until the end of feudal society in 15<sup>th</sup> century. In modern China, along with the development of social productive forces, social progress and affirmation of the value of human existence, people have reconsidered that the value of education should be rooted in student's true ability. The real education is not about whether a student can think or create a theory, but rather about achieving something in the real world. Since the Second World War, the development of the world's economy has been in need of a large number of skilled workers, and innovative talents with comprehensive understanding of different moral, intellectual and physical aspects. In order to cope with the need of cultivating talents' practical ability, the traditional subject curriculum advocates "teacher-centered, classroom-centered and textbook-centered" methods, which only pay attention to knowledge inculcation. This teaching style should be abandoned because it cannot train qualified talents to adapt to the development of the world economy. Since the foundation of New China in 1949, China used Soviet Union's educational model for reference, adopted the branch-type school system, and proposed setting up the activity curriculum besides the subject curriculum. However, due to the deep-rooted traditional teaching, in practice, it is impossible to achieve both. Since the reform and opening-up, the development of the national economy has been in need of educators who can help the development of moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and labor education for the country. Through the reflection on education quality, the Chinese State added integrated practical activity curriculum as a supplement to the subject curriculum into the compulsory course queue. It was issued by the Ministry of Education in June 2001. These two courses have the same status, are interrelated and interact with each other. The so-called "comprehensive learning time" experiential courses in Japan and a variety of specific integrated practical activity courses in United States, are roughly the same as comprehensive practical activity curriculum in China.

## 2. Intension and extension

Mr. Zhong Qiquan believes that the essence of the integrated practical activity curriculum is: (1) based on students' direct experience; (2) related to the world around the student; (3) paying attention to students' personal practice. [1] This is what Mr. Zhong Qiquan stipulated on the basis of the General Outline of Guidance for Comprehensive Practice Activities. Comprehensive Practice Activities is a curriculum form based on students' direct experience, closely linking students' personal life and social life and reflecting the comprehensive application of knowledge. This is a practical course which puts students' experience and life at its core. Its purpose is to deepen students' understanding of the nature. It shows that students' comprehensive practical activities should be based on direct experience rather than on indirect experiences in the classroom. It is different from the subject curriculum, because the most important features are through personal experience, personal practice, personal activity, in order to develop their knowledge and experience. The rigid contents and invariable methods which were included in the traditional subject curriculum have been abandoned.

The new curriculum reform pays attention to the overall educational design, aiming at establishing a dual curriculum, which is a school curriculum composed of subject curriculum and comprehensive practical activities. [2] We do not want to deny the subject knowledge completely, but to keep the two together. Dual curriculum means that these two courses have the same status but different functions. We cannot ignore the imparting effect of subject curriculum on subject knowledge. The advantage of subject curriculum over comprehensive practical activity curriculum is that it can make students indirectly grasp a lot of human experience in a short time. The advantage of integrated practical activity curriculum over subject curriculum is that it can help to foster human's innate self-development. Also, it can help to cultivate and develop students' interest in inquiry. Therefore, the relationship between integrated practical activity curriculum and subject curriculum is a juxtaposition. It is a combination that is compatible and works together. Subject curriculum was made to organize "knowledge" and "experience" with subject content at its core, while comprehensive practice activities have realistic themes at their core. [3] We should not only deny the subject knowledge completely, but also make the subject curriculum play its role. Influenced by the traditional educational concepts, it is easy for people to misunderstand and regard integrated practical activity curriculum as a secondary curriculum compared with subject curriculum, or even as an after-class activity.

Professor Zhang Hua believes that the integrated practical activity curriculum has the characteristics of integrity, practicality, openness, generation and autonomy [4]. Professor Zhang Hua's theory provides a good approach on how to improve shortcomings of our country's branch courses. He believes that the curriculum system of our country has the following shortcomings: firstly, it understands the relationship between individual, society and nature from the perspective of atomism and mechanics, but ignores the integrity of the world, and separates the original unified science, art and morality; secondly, it aims at familiarizing students with subject knowledge and training skills, ignoring all of the students' personality development aspects; thirdly, it relies too heavily on the method of receptive learning and neglects the value of discovery and inquiry learning in human development. Fourthly, it interprets learning as a process of enclosure in books and confinement in the room, ignoring the acquisition of human social experience and the formation of practical skills. [5] It can be seen from the above that Professor Zhang Hua fosters development of students' naturalness, emphasizing the full development of students in a free environment. He emphasizes the important position of "human nature" in education. Education should fully respect the natural abilities of students. On the premise of maintaining the original and beautiful nature of students, "expand it and cultivate it", so as to enable students to have their original nature, rather than products produced by human society. The talents should be enabled to develop all kinds of abilities in a balanced way and then meet the needs of society. This thinking theory is inherited from Rousseau's spirit of natural education.

In October 2017, the Ministry of Education promulgated the Guiding Outline of Integrated

Practical Activities in Primary and Secondary Schools, pointing out that the essence of the integrated practical activities courses is: (1) interdisciplinary practical courses in real life, that help to find and solve problems from real life situations, and participation in activities; through exploration, service, production, experience and other ways, to cultivate students' comprehensive abilities; (2) Comprehensive practical activities are compulsory courses stipulated in the national compulsory education and general senior high school curriculum program. They are set up side by side with subject courses and are an important part of the basic education curriculum system. The curriculum is managed and guided by the local government, and the specific content is mainly made by the school itself. It is implemented from the first grade of primary school to the third grade of senior high school. From this, we can see that the comprehensive practical activity curriculum is a course which takes students' real life needs as the starting point, takes inquiry and experience as the main tools, and aims to improve students' living ability and social adaptability. Judging from its juxtaposition with subject courses, the purpose of setting up comprehensive practical courses in our country is to make up for the single defect of training talents by subject courses, and in the meanwhile, reflects the urgent need of national development for students' ability to deal with real-life problems.

Integrated practical activity curriculum has reduced subject knowledge but compensates it through offering knowledge that can be actually used in the real life. Integrated practical activity curriculum has three main characteristics. Firstly, it is a comprehensive course, reflected in its content and curriculum objectives. The content of the integrated practical activity curriculum is a comprehensive course, which integrates many subjects. Its goal is to train people with balanced development of various abilities, and the emphasis is on the cultivation of students' comprehensive abilities. Secondly, it is a practical activity course, which helps to acquire the development of ability through personal experience, and it is a kind of internalization of direct experience. Thirdly, it is a course, which exerts a purposeful and planned influence on the student knowledge under the guidance of teachers. Here, the leading role of teachers and the main role of students should be properly handled. Although this curriculum emphasizes practical activities and students' direct experience, it should not be interpreted that it is only influenced by student's practice and activities, students are being regularly monitored and mentored. The similarity between integrated practical activity curriculum and subject curriculum lies in the combination of direct experience and indirect experience, the unity of discovery and acceptance. The two types of courses only emphasize different aspects, not that one exists and the other no longer exists, the difference between them is just in proportion and size. In the system of curriculum implementation, they interact and promote each other.

### **3. Function**

The comprehensive practical activity curriculum has two main functions for students' development: one is to develop students' natural attributes, that is, natural skills; the other is to develop students' social attributes, that is, social skills. On one hand, under the premise of students' natural interests and needs, the curriculum of comprehensive practical activities should aim at developing and educating students' own abilities in all aspects; on the other hand, the curriculum of comprehensive practical activities should aim at developing students' abilities to adapt to life in a planned way according to students' social needs. These two abilities are not antagonistic in nature. To a certain extent, natural adaptability includes social adaptability because society is part of the world, and they are inter-connected.

As far as students' psychological development is concerned, the essence of integrated practical activity curriculum is to reduce the negative influence of school education on students' psychological stereotype and rigid thinking which includes stereotype-influenced thinking and Functional fixation. Psychological stereotyping is a form of generalization about some group of people and thus differs from other groups. This kind of generalization is usually over-generalized, inaccurate and at the same time it resists new information (Myers,1990:332). In these courses, by reducing stereotypes, students can have more flexible and broader thinking space in practical

activities, and diverse thinking can play the greatest role. According to behaviorism, human behavior has a stimulus-response connection. Under similar environmental conditions, human beings are bound to respond best to their own experiences. When people use a tool, they only see tool's most common function and will not see the others, this is the theory of functional fixation. It depicts a phenomenon that people can't see the unpopular use-cases of tools which equals the lack of imagination and creativity. However, students promoted by the course of integrated practical activities have an inner motivation which is not regular reflection; they can reflect flexibly, according to the actual situation, instead of simply repeating the previous reaction. This reaction is generative. Students' understanding and comprehensive thinking ability participate in it, and from here we can see the shadow of constructivism. That is to say, it represents the progress of psychology in practice.

The comprehensive practical activity curriculum is a course which takes students' intrinsic interests and potential abilities as the starting point and properly guides students' comprehensive development. It is carried out under the guidance of Marxist theory on the all-round development of human beings. Although the integrated practical activity curriculum emphasizes the development of all aspects, it does not mean that every aspect of every student has to develop. This kind of development, which is not blind, depends on students' innate characteristics and interests. It is developing characteristics of students under the teacher's keen observation and targeted education. And the students can be effectively mentored through this process. This process is the main difference from the traditional teaching disciplines. The teaching methods of traditional disciplines also pay attention to the development of students' personality, but under the influence of the same learning content to all, students result in being shaped no different in comparison to each other. At a certain period in human history, for example, during the time of slave society, it accelerated the development of human culture. This kind of shaping has had certain significance and power to promote social progress, but it was not adapted in all history periods because any curriculum has its own historical limitations. What modern society needs is education that can make students fully develop their personality and have comprehensive practical ability. In contrast, too many commonalities inevitably make our society less colorful, and restrict social innovation and movement.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The integrated practical activity curriculum is based on the knowledge construction advocated by Dewey's educational life theory. Its main goal is to enable students to experience life dynamically with the participation of interest, need and subjective initiative, then to construct their own experience based on their own understanding. This kind of education is rooted in so-called "life", which means survival and activity. One is out of respect and love for life, the other is on the criticism of traditional subject education. Discovering world is not achieved in the classroom through meditation, but by going out of the classroom, out of the campus, to know the world, develop knowledge and accumulate experience through contacting with the real world. It is a "life" education. If the content and methodology of education refer to students' life, it does not mean that traditional curriculum is non-existent, instead, it aims to change the situation of how the traditional curriculum has been detached from child's life. The goal is to let children get out of the life that adults set for them and live their own valuable life [6]. It does not mean that we do want to deny the subject curriculum, contrarily we want it as a supplement to the subject curriculum, so that students can learn not only in the classroom, but also different contents through other ways. The two curriculums are not mutually exclusive, but mutually cooperative.

Comprehensive Practice Course is a compulsory course implemented by the state based on the demand for talents. It reflects the development of productive forces and progress of the state and society. The comprehensive practice course has its historical significance and meets the requirements of talents for our country's present and future economic development. It was developed against the traditional theory which is "subject center" by Herbart, represented by Dewey's "student center" theory abroad. Although it lagged behind due to the low level of China's

national conditions and productivity development at that time, it was not discovered by students independently, like in the United States, and completely abandoned the subject curriculum. The enactment of the National Defense Education Act of the United States shows that complete activity courses are not feasible. However, a complete subject curriculum is not advisable. In fact, only one kind of curriculum does not conform to the laws of biology and sociality which lie in human development progress. It is precisely because our country has set up comprehensive practical courses besides subject courses, both of them can jointly promote students' development, cultivating fully developed students. During the actual process of education, in order to produce the greatest effectiveness, we have to combine the two approaches together.

## References

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