

The Research on the Connotation, Types, Reasons, and Enlightenment of Null Curriculum*

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With respect to the students, society, and knowledge development, the null curriculum is defined as the curriculum which is need for students to learn and at the same time contribute to the overall and harmonious development of the society, but it has been overlooked in the process of curriculum development intentionally or unintentionally. Its main types including ideology class null curriculum, value orientation class null curriculum, and vulnerable groups' class null curriculum. The formation of null curriculum is due to the ideological intervention, curriculum's characteristics, and the limitation of the persons who developed the curriculum. The null curriculum provides beneficial reference and enlightenment for curriculum reform.

Keywords: null curriculum, connotation, types, reasons, enlightenment

Introduction

In the process of the new round of basic education reform, the phenomenon of curriculum urbanization appears. The curriculum and related textbooks embodied the forgetting of the countryside, in particular, the relevant rural features, rural customs, rural culture, and so on. From the perspective of educational equity, balanced development of education and the promotion of all-round development of students, this forgetting of the countryside in the curriculum and the consequent tendency of urbanization center are all disadvantageous to the all-round diversified development of students. It is not conducive to the fair and equitable development of education as well. Certainly, there are many reasons for this phenomenon, but to some extent, it is precisely what professor E. W. Eisner put forward in the "null curriculum" in the new curriculum reform. Therefore, from the perspective of sociology, this paper probes into the connotation of "null curriculum" and the causes of its formation, so as to provide enlightenment for the new curriculum reform and prevent the phenomenon of forgetting in the curriculum.

The Connotation of Null Curriculum

The concept of "null curriculum" was first proposed in 1979 by E. W. Eisner, a famous scholar, in his book *Educational Imagination*, "Past curriculum research has focused on the existing curriculum in schools, but this is

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not enough,” he said. In addition to the existing curriculum, there are areas in which there are vacancies, some of which should be given attention and which should not be left vacant, which he referred to as the “null curriculum,” which is the curriculum that should be available in schools but is not (Eisner, 1979, pp. 97-104). In the original sense of the null curriculum when it was first proposed, it is relative to certain value orientations or different standards from different perspectives, in other words, the courses offered by the schools have forgotten some courses that should have been offered but were not. As a knowledge-bearing course, it can only embody part of the knowledge, that is, it must give up part of the content, so that the knowledge and skills acquired by students are only a small part of the numerous knowledge. Inevitably, a part of the content are left out while it should be presented in the textbook. The most common curriculum content is mainly “intentionally or unintentionally ignored some non-mainstream cultural history, traditions, and concepts, including the vulnerable groups” (Shi & Li, 2009), such as the forgetting of the countryside in the textbook contents in the curriculum reform. As some scholars have pointed out, textbooks are full of the facts that more and more famous people, such as great person and scholars have been shaped, but there are few descriptions of people of lower social status, such as peasants and disabled people. Figures who are noted and outstanding have been described vividly, whereas the depictions of vulnerable figures are few (or only stay in the identity of the group), the characters are not specific and complete. In many cases, the so-called “legitimacy knowledge” or “official knowledge” is permitted in curriculum textbooks, but does not contain the contents of vulnerable groups, and so-called “cultural silence” appears, the essence is the phenomenon of null content and null curriculum.

Therefore, the null course refers to the students, society, and knowledge development, it is the course content that the students need to learn and at the same time contribute to the overall harmonious development of society, the part of a course or content that is intentionally or unintentionally left blank by the curriculum developer. Specifically, from the perspective of curriculum purposes, the null curriculum plays a positive role in nature or reflects the essence of seeking truth from science and seeking truth from history, etc. From the perspective of curriculum content, most of the null courses belong to the weak, unconcerned, and non-mainstream part of culture or content. In curriculum design, the null courses represent the empty of curriculum developers, either consciously or unconsciously, quite a lot of that are determined by ideology or the class nature of the rulers, but also partly are due to the knowledge, vision, values, and other limitations of the curriculum developers.

The Types of Null Curriculum

At present, there is no relevant definition about the classification of null curriculum, but we can refer to the standard and content about the classification of null curriculum in textbooks. Some scholars believe that, “The production of textbooks is the result of the conflict and compromise of various forces, and their editing, revision, and use must be balanced as far as possible in terms of social value, student development value, and intellectual value. This conflict, compromise, and balance of different values and the satisfaction of different values often constitute different types of empty textbooks” (Shi & Li, 2009). Thus, the null content of textbooks can be divided into:

1. The null content which is partial to the social value (the empty content which is mainly judged from the angle of the dominant group or the mainstream ideology of the country is the null content of the specific social value);

2. The null content which is partial to the students’ development value (the null content which is judged from the angle of the students’ harmonious development, is the empty and the lack of the students’ development value);

3. The null content which is partial to the knowledge development value (that is, there should be but there is not or there is no right content in the view of the development of the specific knowledge or discipline).

In addition, some scholars divide the null content of textbooks into five categories: “null content of government, null content of public opinion, null content of expert, null content of student, and null content of teacher” (Li, 2006, pp. 15-17).

It can be seen that, from different angles, according to different standards can be divided into different types of null curriculum. From the point of view of the sociology of education, the null curriculum represents the ruling class to maintain its dominance or promote mainstream values, so that part of the curriculum is vacant and not transmitted or promoted through education. Of course, there is also a part due to the limitations of the curriculum developers inadvertently caused by the null content. Therefore, the null curriculum can be divided according to the purpose of the null courses.

The First is the Ideology of the Null Curriculum

Such courses are vacant, because they do not meet the interests and requirements of the ruling class, such as the distortion and emptiness of Japanese textbooks and related curricula about the invasion of China or the fact that during the Saddam administration, his face appeared on the first page of almost every textbook in Iraq, elementary school students would follow their teachers and chant “I love Saddam” every day. Now, the latest textbooks in Iraq have deleted all references to Saddam, leaving Saddam and his history blank. Ideological null curriculum is often caused by political reasons. Of course, the specific reasons are very complex.

The Second is Value-Oriented Non-Curriculum

This kind of curriculum often carries the non-mainstream value orientation, or the value it embodies and permeates is contrary to the mainstream value. For example, in the controversy over the text “The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain,” we can see that the contents of the non-mainstream value orientation are being emptied out, and the text has been officially deleted from the new Chinese textbook in Shanghai, editor-in-chief Xu Genrong explained that the text reflected a big gap between the times and the living environment of the students from childhood, so it is not crucial to use these wartime-themed texts to educate the students, the function of its “teaching” and “learning” is minimal. “The Five Heroes of Langya Mountain” embodies the fearless national spirit and heroic spirit of the Chinese people in resisting the Japanese aggression, which should be regarded as the essence of the excellent culture of the Chinese nation, but because of the changes of the environment and the changes of the mainstream value orientation in the new era, it has been left empty.

The Third is the Weak Cultural Class Null Curriculum

This kind of curriculum is vacant because of the strong cultural impact and publicity and the weak cultural decline. For example, in the new curriculum, the forgetting of rural culture, the disappearing of migrant workers, the neglect of the disabled culture and the disappearance of the bottom culture, etc. Of course, the division of the content of the course is only relative and cannot be exhaustive. It just gives us a different perspective of understanding the vacant of the curriculum.

The Reasons of Null Curriculum

From the above discussion, we can see that the reasons for the absence of curriculum are various and extremely complex, which involves ideological control, mainstream value orientation, and the impact of strong culture, etc. From the point of view of the sociology of education, the main reason for the formation of null

curriculum is the need to maintain the rule of the ruling class, but also involves the knowledge of curriculum developers and vision limitations.

Ideological Interference

Ideological interference is ubiquitous, and maintaining the ruling class's rule through ideological control is one of the main measures taken by the rulers. The term "ideology" was coined by the French thinker Teresi, which originally meant the science of ideas. He believed that the establishment of a system of correct ideas would lead to the formation of knowledge that would promote social progress. Later, ideology was gradually used as a derogatory term with the negative meaning of social domination. Some scholars believe that, "Ideology is a system of ideas about the world and society, including political, legal, artistic, philosophical, moral, educational, religious, and so on, which is formed on the basis of certain economy and influenced by social culture. It is an ideological criterion or program that guides people's practice and action" (Wu, 1999, p. 48). The ruling class instills ideology into the curriculum to control students' minds. As the course content always reflects and is controlled by an ideology, ruling class achieves social control through ideological content. The selection criteria for the course content focus on the ideological character of the ruling class, and these criteria, either explicitly or implicitly, reinforce the ideology. As Michael W. Apple (2003) put it, "A formal school knowledge system can become a form of social and economic control, because it accepts or rejects certain content, usually for ideological purposes, because they preserve and distribute what is known as 'legitimate knowledge'—knowledge that all of us must possess" (p. 64). So, the choice of course content is, to some extent, an exercise of power.

Characteristics of the Curriculum

Because each discipline has formed its own unique characteristics in the process of formation and development, coupled with different needs in different periods of the market, it will inevitably lead to various disciplines receive different degrees of attention, the so-called "popular subject" and "unpopular subject" have also led to their own different fate. For example, from the perspective of discipline structure, from the macro perspective, there are national curriculum, local curriculum, and school-based curriculum. They all influence the curriculum to different degrees based on their respective "cultural interests," which involves the contrast of power and strength between the state and local school in the development process. From a meso-perspective, the position of different subjects in the curriculum system is different, and the sociology of education regard this "position difference" as the "class nature" of subject knowledge, that is, there are "high-status knowledge" and "low-status knowledge":

1. Instrumental discipline is in the most important part in the discipline system. For example, Chinese studies, mathematics, and foreign languages;
2. The knowledge of science and technology and the professional and technical knowledge with economic benefits have become the second-highest status knowledge in the subject system;
3. "Social directional" knowledge also becomes the higher status knowledge in the discipline system.

From the micro-angle of view, that is, from the knowledge which constitutes a discipline. These knowledge bears the cognitive function and the value function. Through the analysis of primary and secondary school textbooks, we can clearly see the value it carries, such as patriotism, collectivism, dauntless heroic revolutionism, and so on. From the perspective of curriculum structure, the value of curriculum, and its own characteristics lead to the inadaptability to the mainstream needs, the inadaptability to the market value of the curriculum or course content will inevitably lead to the fatalism of being vacant.

The Limitations of Curriculum Developers

Due to the curriculum developers own cultural level, knowledge attainment, narrow vision, and other aspects, the relevant curriculum content is ignored, so that part of the curriculum is vacant. On the one hand, it is because of the conscious vacant of the curriculum developers and the conscious information control of the editors for some consideration. On the other hand, it is because of the unconscious vacant of the editors, this is often due to the limitations of the curriculum developers themselves, such as the new curriculum reform in the forgotten phenomenon of the countryside, and so on, most of the curriculum developers are white-collar class, because their lives “foresight,” when compiling and reviewing textbooks, they are all carried out with “urbanization thinking.” Even if the textbooks try to present some rural content, these content have been intentionally or unintentionally given the meaning of urbanization, and look at the countryside from the eyes of urban residents—most of the sights are scenery, which leads to the vacant of many contents in the countryside.

The Enlightenment of Null Curriculum for the Curriculum Reform in Basic Education

Null curriculum embodies the curriculum which should be set up but is vacant, therefore, in the new curriculum reform, no matter from the macro-, medium- or micro-point of view, curriculum developers, curriculum implementers, curriculum managers, and other personnel related to the curriculum should take a comprehensive view of the curriculum and reflect the overall thinking of all classes in the curriculum guiding ideology. Of course, the core is to serve the common interests of the whole nation. In the course content, we should prevent the vacancy of the countryside, the disadvantaged groups, and the people at the bottom. In the course structure, there is a need to rethink the so-called “key disciplines” and “popular majors,” “unpopular majors,” as well as the composition of these disciplines, and so on. In a word, in the new curriculum reform, we should look at the curriculum and curriculum reform from a comprehensive and dynamic perspective, and try to prevent the emergence of null curriculum and the negative impact caused by it.

Conclusion

Null curriculum is an objective curriculum phenomenon, which reflects the selective neglect and forgetfulness of curriculum by curriculum developers or implementers. To some extent, null curriculum reflects the unfairness in curriculum practice. It is not conducive to the promotion of curriculum reform and the improvement of teaching quality. This study is only a tentative exploration of the connotation, types, reasons, and practical enlightenment of null curriculum. In the follow-up study, it is necessary to carry out in-depth research on the generative mechanism of null curriculum. On this basis, furthermore, it is needed to put forward the optimized path of curriculum design and implementation, so as to regresses curriculum authenticity in curriculum practice, embodies curriculum justice, and promotes curriculum reform.

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