

On the history education of social studies in the United States

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Abstract

In the United States, the social studies opened early, and were perfect and mature. History education is one of the social studies, the experiences and lessons of history education in American social studies is a good way to serve the education of China.

The United States is the earliest country, which opened social studies in the world; social studies of the United States have a wealth of practical experience, the consummation curriculum system and the strong theoretical support. History education is an organic part of social studies; this article will explore the status and role of history education in American social studies, summarize the experience for reference, and service the education of China.

Keywords: social studies, history education, the United States.

1. The status of history education in social science subjects

In the school education of the United States, the history is a traditional course. Along with the development of times and the change of the society, history education has been incorporated into social science subjects gradually, become an organic part of social science subjects, although presentation of history education has experienced a branch to the comprehensive development, history education plays an irreplaceable role in national shape of the United States.

Social studies are combinations of social science and humanities which enhance citizen's ability. Social studies are disciplines which integrate many disciplines and face to the requirements including multicultural education, national education, international understanding education, survival education and civic consciousness cultivation. History as an organic part of social studies is because the history education plays an important role in perfection of "individual consciousness" and the development of "citizen", which concern individual development and national progress and is received more attention than other disciplines in the social studies. According to statistics, in social studies of a lot of American high school grade 6 to 8, students are focused on the historical study. In the survey of the history course by the American education progress assessment, they found that when the 8th grade students were asked whether they are now in American history class, there are 83% of the students answer "yes", 17% answered "no". In 1994, 95% of high school graduates once had American history class for one year. 60% of the students learn a year history course.^{[1] P.14} Every year, about 200 thousand students from 8000 schools take the history advanced placement test of the United States which are popular increasingly, the history of the United States is the most popular subjects in advanced placement test.^{[1] pp. 10-11} These data clearly suggest that history education occupies a high position in the heart of social individual, and this is not common in China.

The number of each subject's knowledge content determines the discipline status in social studies to a great extent. In the last century, at the beginning of the birth of social studies, 1916 annual commission of the national education association set the recommended scheme of what national social studies curriculum should be taught at various stages. Later, national association of social studies education established the ten theme axis of social studies and social studies curriculum content scope and sequence arrangement of each grade. Proportion of history teaching is high in whether "the recommended scheme of national education association", or "the current teaching category and order".

American social studies specialist Michael Wieland said: “in fact, history to be one of social studies subjects has its deep thinking.... Keeping any sense are derived from experience, and although experience of human was in a constantly changing and developing, it contained the meaning of history. Perhaps, this is the reason why all the people often study history. History told that human beings who they are.”^{[2] p. 115} History education is dominant in the social and family education, because any particular subject is a historical phenomenon, is be went into the historical scenario analysis, it can say history is only a door for human social science of all human experience to some extent, no one aspect of human survival and development was beyond the scope of historical study and analysis.

2. The goal of history education in social studies

History is the organic part of social studies, but social studies is not simple platter of humanities and social science subjects, but it represented human society objectively and comprehensively taking modern society as the foothold, integrated the history, geography, politics, ethics, sociology and other subjects with the human society and students’ social experience into a new system of students’ learning, that is a new curriculum, it aims to cultivate students’ and citizens’ basic literacy and humanistic spirit, and promote their socialization process.^{[2] P. 1}

The education goal of American social studies is to train qualified citizens for the future society, the goal of history education be subject to the goal of social studies. History occupies an important position in the social studies, not only because history education has been regarded as the general citizen education important constituent for long, but also because it could effectively achieve the goal of “training the citizens with knowledge, sense of responsibility, and participating in social affairs actively”, through internalizing the values and social morality, it could let the social individual action according to the expectations of mainstream ideas and thinking, and help the individual to achieve the process of “socialization” actively and effectively.

American scholar Walter Park thought it could achieve the following five aims through the history education in social studies.^[4] A. Judgment. Historical knowledge and skills can help people to form a better judgment, especially the “political judgment”. B. Sympathy and self-knowledge. It makes students understand the world's people, understand their struggle and appreciate their humanity, recognize the many different ethnic groups and their way of life, and deepen the understanding of them. C. Imagine. Expanding and stimulating the students' imagination, giving them the never actual experience. In some cases, the student would be thankful without such as realistic an experience as other cases, they were eager to see. D. Power. Power refers to the energy of the personal or public action. Through the study of history, it makes the students realize that they are shaped by the past, in the same way; they will shape the future for others. E. Foresight. Experiencing, feeling and understanding the human history on the front with the rear up, and put it to infiltrate in students' judgment -- this is the vision, long-term thinking.

The education goal is for the overall goals of the history of education in social studies, it depends on the ten major theme axis to implement, in every subject axis, it related to the high contents integration of different disciplines in different extent, and it default the ability achievement which was expected to show for different grade, education goals present different depth and breadth based on students' cognitive development characteristics, and reflects the high degree of integration.

History education’s goal is not only to make students have a good knowledge of historical knowledge, promote the improvement of the humanities, at the same time, more importantly, through the integration of historical understanding ability whose core is historical thinking ability, it could cultivated the ability of students’ sequence thinking, understanding history, historical analysis, interpretation, historical research, analyzing historical problems and making decisions. At presenting the history chronicles written and said by predecessor to students, it also help students have history chronicles at the same time, namely realizing the double-track development of knowledge and ability through educating students history, making history while studying history.

3. The content of the history education in social studies

The social studies curriculum are generally use category and sequence table method to determine learning content elements of each grade. It should establish the content of the transverse category or field first, and then according to certain order, such as the order from schools, families and communities to countries and world, arrange the content elements of various fields from shallow to deep, make learning content of each grade rise and extend circularly.

Finally, according to the all content elements in the field of each grade, it should look for appropriate subject and material; these topics will integrate these elements as a whole to constitute a unit or the text. That is to say, the process of the development of social studies education contains a number of contents elements of different levels in the field, content elements is relatively stable, but the ability training which should be achieved by content elements is “rising and extending circularly”.

In “national social studies curriculum standard”, the appearance of theme axis changed the dilemma that social studies were knocked together by knowledge simply, it was no longer a particular study of a specific subject knowledge by some grade, but rather to present by a new look. These themes shaft through the grade, that is, in each grade, the theme axis will appear more or less, and according to the deepening and development of students’ cognitive level, the selected content and the goal expected to achieve of the theme axis present a certain expansibility and extensibility. There are similarities between theme axis and the specific subjects, but it beyond the original subject areas, social studies design the social classes combining with the results of relevant disciplines from the social life and the life experience of the students. So history education is not possible to appear with complete subject system appearance, but is subject to the need of social studies, and integrated organically.

4. The enlightenment of history education in American social studies for China

4.1 Forming the history learning system systematizing primary and secondary schools

The design of history education systematizing primary and secondary school in American social studies is historical contents succeeds each other, and present spiraling higher continuity, and the progressive of the education goal. The content elements of history education widened in concentric circles following the principle of “from the near to the distant”, “from the concrete to the abstract” and “from ancient times to the present”, on the basis of student life experience, and with intersection point of their own space and time as the center of the circle. Starting from kindergarten, it educated the student with history, and has a lot of theoretical research on history education in social studies of middle and primary schools. It has created the extremely advantageous condition for the development of students’ historical ability of comprehension and thinking.

There are two types including departmental and comprehensive system in the humanities social sciences education of primary and secondary schools in China, the comprehensive system was at the start stage, for the integration of social science education learning contents, and current comprehensive settings of social studies in some areas of China, the consolidation strength is still a big lack, comprehensive system settings are on the surface, but it is a phase departmental teaching in essence, and the teaching contents of humanities and social disciplines which were not set with comprehensive system in the primary and secondary schools repeated in practice. For example, after the second history curriculum in Shanghai, the humanities and social science contents of primary school is the comprehensive settings, and have carried on the related integration, and the contents of middle and high schools is departmental system, but there are a lot of similarities, although the teaching goals are different, but teaching the same content twice is wasting teaching resources undoubtedly. Second, the attraction of the same content would fall a lot for students naturally.

In either situation, it will deviate from the ideal target of social studies teaching, and one of the important ways to solve this problem is integrating the teaching contents of humanities and social science disciplines, including the horizontal integration of the teaching contents of the humanities and social sciences and the vertical integration of same subject, that is to integrate the teaching resources of humanities and social sciences disciplines for the practice of a certain grade teaching from horizontal, and forming the teaching content have to be that the same discipline teaching content is not repeated from vertical.

Establishing the integration of teaching objectives and teaching contents need the cooperation of humanities and social science, rather than individually. The integration of social studies involves a lot of humanities and social sciences, despite there is a certain convergence between the humanities social sciences, but the more obvious is that each discipline has a distinct disciplines features. Today the development of interdisciplinary research has three big resistances. First is the lack of interdisciplinary consensus. Even in the United States whose interdisciplinary research is developed relatively, scholars have also complained that the interdisciplinary research is seen as a raffish, scientific research achievements are downplayed. Second is rigid scientific research system. Scientific research institution and scientific research activities are basically in accordance with the traditional disciplines and professional to distinguish, it is lack of cooperation and connection between the disciplines. Third is subject balkanization of traditional education.

This kind of education only tend to meet future talent cultivation, basically does not consider the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary talents education and training. It is not happening overnight to overcome these three aspects with long-standing resistance, this situation will continue, and even exist for a long time. [3] So, it must communicate effectively and establish the integration of the teaching goal according to the needs of era, the development of the society and the students' cognitive regularity and many other factors to achieve the construction goal of comprehensive social science with a high level integration. Only established the integrated curriculum system, teaching objectives and contents, we could achieve truly integration of humanities and social science disciplines, our advantage is we can use the experience of integrating social studies by other countries for reference, can form integration of social studies which is suitable for the situation of our country quickly on the international comparison and predecessors' experience.

4.2 Attaching importance to historical thinking ability

The historical research method should be educated early. American elementary school history teaching makes students realize the history is not just national and history and world history, everything of the human past all can become history. And elementary school is very pay attention to the guidance of historical thinking and research. History teaching is not simply to teach students what happened in the past, but to help students conclude what happened in the past through reasoning, and pay attention to the development of historical thinking ability and historical research methods. By contrast, Chinese history in elementary school is limited to teach the story of some heroes or people with noble quality character in the history on the choice of teaching content, historical thought and research methods, it is far distance with real life relatively, the purpose of history education is lack of the attention to students' "individual consciousness" perfect, focuses on the role of history to develop the students' patriotic emotion and moral quality, only requires students to memorize history simply, and did not focus on the early education of historical thinking and methods.

Overall, teaching history in American social studies is built on the basis of full understanding of students' cognitive level, through the integration of learning content, it not only pays attention to the growth of the students' humanities accomplishment, also focus on the development of historical thinking ability taking students' understanding of history as the core, pay attention to the double-track development of students' "individual consciousness" and "citizen". It has great reference value for the history curriculum reform in our country, and especially solving the history contents arrangement of comprehensive social studies courses and the integration of history teaching contents between the primary and middle school.

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