Analysis of Conflicts Between Life-Goal Education and Academic Education in Secondary School Education in the New Era, and Reform Ways

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Abstract. The weakening of life-goal education during secondary schools has gained widespread attention, yet existing educational systems still fail to integrate goal-oriented guidance with academic instruction to some extent. Based on contemporary secondary education, this study analyzes the contradictions between life-goal education and academic education in terms of teaching objectives and methods, assessment and evaluation system, and educational effectiveness. Research indicates that the current education system over-relies on instrumental assessment, while ignoring the existential assessment. This causes problems such as the lack of a sense of purpose, insufficient intrinsic motivation, and reduced social adaptability. Four possible approaches are proposed to resolve conflicts: integrating and innovating teaching methods to achieve a balance between academic knowledge acquisition and life goal development; reforming assessment systems to foster personalized, multidimensional learning; strengthening collaborative faculty training to reinforce teachers' responsibility in life-goal education; and optimizing curriculum integration to promote interdisciplinary and tiered development.

Keywords: Life-Goal Education, Academic Education, Secondary School Education

1. Introduction

From Liberal to Holistic Education, cultivating individuals with both knowledge and sound character has always been the ultimate goal of teaching. Driven by the fast pace of social change and the growing demand for skills across various sectors, competence-based approaches have gradually become the prevailing education paradigm today. In this climate, parents and schools tend to prioritize academic achievement and subject-specific knowledge, while they relatively overlook life-goal education that cultivates a sense of direction, purpose, and significance of students in life. Secondary education is known as the critical period for cultivating personal values; however, life-goal education faces systemic weaknesses.

Research has shown that some young people are striving to establish a stable value system, which may indirectly lead to issues such as low mood and reduced self-efficacy [1]. The resulting uncertainty not only weakens intrinsic motivation but also has a negative impact on social adaptability, leading to a vicious cycle that can intensify further psychological problems, including

anxiety and depression [2]. Furthermore, studies indicate that young people with low self-efficacy usually exhibit a passive consistency in adult career decision-making: they are more inclined to follow trends rather than make choices based on their own interests and abilities [3]. These findings suggest that, to some extent, current education tends to deviate from the primary goal of promoting individuals' overall development.

Therefore, this study will focus on secondary education. It will analyze conflicts between life-goal education and current academic education from multiple perspectives, such as educational objectives, instructional methods, evaluation systems, and learning outcomes. Moreover, this study will propose several possible solutions, which aim to help students acquire academic knowledge and benefit from effective life-goal education simultaneously. The ultimate goal is to help students form initial future objectives, thereby promoting their overall development.

2. The importance of life-goal education in secondary education

2.1. The value of life-goal education

The sense of purpose in life partly affects the physical and mental health of individuals. Indeed, life-goal education can facilitate students with systematic guidance to achieve development. It crosses three aspects: self-awareness, value clarification, and relationship with society. First, to understand more deeply the self-awareness, life-goal education guides students to understand their interests, abilities, and possibilities. In addition, this kind of specialized education will help to create stable beliefs, encourage them to think about "What is meaningful to me " and " Which values I am willing to be responsible for?". Students can find common ground between individuals and society by understanding reality and linking their goals with the goals of society.

Life-goal education also pays equal attention to both knowledge and personality formation. For individuals, society, and the country, it is important. With this kind of education system, they can determine the life goals of each person and achieve a higher self-identity, better mental abilities, and stronger responsibility. Therefore, when they face challenges in the future, they can remain active to overcome difficulties. In terms of society, life-goal education helps to strengthen group bonds and promote a harmonious atmosphere. In the case of a country, life-goal education can stimulate individuals to work together towards the goals of the country and achieve the long-term goals of the country.

2.2. The critical role of life-goal education in secondary education

In Piaget's theory of cognitive development, students aged 10 to 15 experience a key growing period of self-awareness and attitude formation. They are no longer satisfied with solely living in the present. Instead, they start to think about critical issues relating to their value determination, including "Who am I?" and "What kind of person will I become?" [4]. Normally, life goals possessed by students are fantasy and imitative. With the aid of mature cognition and continual influence of surroundings, they gradually start to engage in reflection by learning how to analyze their own behavior and objectives and weighing "What do I want to do?" with "What can I actually do?". During the process, they will mimic external values at first, then, through internalization and synthesis, they can form unique personal goals.

Consequently, the adolescent environment has a huge impact on an individual's life goal formation. If students have chances to receive proper guidance during this phase, they are likely to perform better in various aspects in the future. Suggested by the research, students with a strong

sense of purpose tend to show higher life satisfaction and emotional well-being, goal-directed cognitive patterns, a lower percentage of suffering from psychosocial illnesses, and fewer risk-taking behaviors. On the contrary, those who lack life goals are more likely to encounter psychological issues such as depression [2].

2.3. The guiding role of school in establishing life goals

By providing academic knowledge, schools play an important role in instilling positive values in young people. For example, the study of classical literature helps to cultivate a sense of belonging to family and people, social responsibility, moral character, and ethical sensitivity. Similarly, solving mathematical problems not only develops logical conclusions but also develops a rational spirit to pursue truth and minimize emotional bias. In biology classes, DNA, from the complex structure to life, reveals the beauty and fragility of life and deepens understanding and respect for living systems. These subjects provide students with the knowledge and ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to find meaning. Also, teachers' daily actions, personal charisma, and approaches to problem-solving become role models and subtly shape young people's values. Outside the classroom, the school environment has an indirect but powerful impact. Extracurricular activities such as club activities, volunteer activities, and social practices allow students to explore goals through practical experiences and transform them into realistic contexts.

3. The conflict between life-goal education and academic education

3.1. The conflict between teaching objectives and methods

Currently, life-goal education and academic education face multiple contradictions in objectives and methodologies. Barnett states that classroom education encounters a triple disconnect: life-goal education, classroom instruction, and professional education [5]. The root of this issue is an imbalance in the allocation of time and resources among meaning, knowledge, and skills. Driven by pressures such as entrance examinations, schools often prioritize the latter two at the expense of the former, which leads to a superficial implementation of life-goal education. Nussbaum warns that an excessively utilitarian educational approach will constrain citizens' development of responsibility and democratic opportunity [6].

Life-goal education mainly refers to slogans and conceptual expressions lacking practical pathways and connections with personal experience, such as "Be successful.", "Serve the nation.", and "Realize self-worth." In schools, such a kind of education appears through lectures, slogans, political lessons, or official documents. All of them stress uniform ideals and values. In contrast, this abstract, unidirectional goal-setting fails to take students' actual situation and differentiated needs into account. Therefore, it cannot help students to foster a sense of purpose, and it further causes negative impacts.

According to Mezirow's life-changing learning theory, forming life goals requires reflection and cognitive dissonance [7]. Today's teenagers prefer to learn through questioning, discussion, and real-life situations. When life-goal education lacks interaction and exploration, it feels like indoctrination. Students may see it as empty talk, which reduces their motivation and connection to school.

Furthermore, the issue is compounded by the lack of connection between subject-specific learning and broader life meanings. When students learn subjects in isolation – without linking them to personal values or aspirations – they struggle to find inner motivation or purpose. Without these

connections, learning outcomes may fall short. In summary, as Nussbaum suggests, education should aim at growing capabilities [6]. This approach helps students gain knowledge and skills while also giving them room to reflect on values and meaning.

3.2. Contradictions within the assessment and evaluation system

Educational assessment, a crucial component of the education system, can be divided into two types: instrumental and existential [8]. Instrumental assessment measures students' mastery of knowledge and skills, working well for evaluating subject learning. Existential assessment, on the other hand, focuses on inner values, life goals, and the journey of self-discovery. A balanced education system should use both types of assessment. The emphasis on either type of assessment may vary depending on the subject being taught, as different subjects may require different approaches to effectively measure student development.

Hargreaves and Shirley, prominent figures in educational theory, emphasize that schools should incorporate more existential assessments [9]. Tools like growth portfolios can help nurture students' values and inner development. Biesta also argues that life-goal education requires existential teaching methods, such as Socratic dialogue, which help students connect deeply with learning. They support the formation of meaningful goals, rather than just preparing for exams.

However, current education too heavily relies on quantitative grading. This over-reliance on quantitative grading can limit innovative educational ideas, such as Biesta's concepts on existential education, which are often constrained by rigid evaluation systems [10]. While instrumental assessment effectively measures academic knowledge, it overlooks inner development, which is a significant limitation for life-goal education. Overusing scores may prevent students from forming solid values and cause them to struggle to internalize learning deeply. Research shows that focusing excessively on grades reduces students' sense of purpose by 41% [11]. In other words, when students care primarily about scores, they often disregard personal meaning and life goals.

High-stakes testing also leads to Campbell's Law: when it measures something too often, it distorts its true purpose. Test-focused evaluation redirects effort from learning to test-taking strategies. For example, students might stop learning for their own benefit and instead chase scores. In this system, students may become overly focused on grades, leading to a mechanical and utilitarian approach to learning, where the intrinsic value of education is overshadowed by the pursuit of high scores. They often memorize rather than think deeply. Over time, they disengage from meaningful learning.

As a result, the imbalance between instrumental and existential assessment weakens life-goal education. Students are left with little space to explore their own aspirations, instead spending their energy pursuing high marks. Instead, they spend their energy pursuing high marks.

3.3. The practical dilemmas of educational effectiveness

Academic education often yields visible short-term results, providing students with immediate benefits. By gaining knowledge and skills, students can improve their job prospects. In contrast, life-goal education focuses on inner growth and purpose. Its effects emerge gradually and are difficult to measure in the short term.

As a result of the immediate benefits of academic education, many students choose to focus on academic courses. They want to build practical skills and stay competitive. Schools, too, respond to student needs by prioritizing academic courses. As a result, they tend to devote more time to

teaching subjects than to life goals. In fact, studies show that 78% of schools spend less than 3% of class time on life-goal education. Most of that time is replaced by specialized courses.

However, despite the limited focus on life-goal education, research shows that schools that emphasize life-goal education may have lower short-term graduation rates. By age 35, their graduates report much higher life satisfaction than those from exam-focused schools [12]. This suggests that although exam-oriented education may improve short-term academic performance, it often fails to support deep purpose or long-term development.

4. Possible approaches to resolving conflicts

To resolve the tension between life-goal education and academic learning, experts and educators have proposed various strategies. The key is to move beyond the binary opposition between the two. Instead, it should integrate meaning, knowledge, and skills through changes in both educational structures and teaching methods.

4.1. Integration and innovation in teaching methods

New ways are offered by digital tools to improve academic learning with life-goal education. Digital platforms (like Seesaw or Mahara) can create personalized scenarios based on students' own goals during lessons. This helps students connect what they learn to their personal sense of meaning [13].

Some experts also suggest using a "Meaning Ecology" framework to link goals, knowledge, and skills together. It expands where learning happens: not just classrooms but also workplaces and local communities. Finally, it balances short-term skill building with long-term purpose [5]. Through these strategies, learning becomes a unified and purposeful process. It moves away from feeling like a list of separate tasks.

4.2. Reform of the assessment and evaluation system

Traditional standardized testing often leads to the convergence of learning objectives. This weakens the unique role of life-goal education. Therefore, education must move away from a standardized model and toward personalized and diversified assessment methods.

Eisner proposed an approach called "Educational Connoisseurship." Its core approach involves critical narrative analysis. For example, teachers can use goal evolution logs and meaning maps to track students' goal-action alignment [14].

In addition, Shute's research shows that mathematical or strategy games can support implicit assessment. For example, students' resource allocation decisions in the game can reflect their altruistic tendencies [15]. This allows for assessment to occur naturally through gameplay.

The National Institute of Education in Singapore has developed a tool called the Goal Development Ruler. This tool assesses students' progress along three dimensions: perceived meaning, commitment to action, and social connection. This provides teachers with a practical tool for long-term monitoring of students' goal development.

4.3. Collaborative faculty development

Teachers are valuable guides and pedagogy designers, so it is necessary to make a breakthrough in teachers' development frameworks. For instance, the National Institute of Education in Singapore has proposed a teacher training program regarding existential philosophy, neuropedagogy, and transformative design as the three pillars of life-goal education, and added a four-year teacher

training system. This new education system helps teachers to comprehend the psychological and neurological mechanisms of adolescent goal development. Furthermore, on the teacher evaluation aspect, it is advisable to introduce the Student Teacher Evaluation Goal Stability Index as an evaluation metric. Also, when teachers seek promotion, requiring them to submit a Meaningful Education Portfolio, containing five years of documented evidence of teaching and educational practice, will reinforce teachers' sense of responsibility and practical competence within goal-oriented education.

4.4. Optimization and integration of the curriculum system

One proposed approach to curriculum reform emphasizes interdisciplinary and tiered approaches, aiming to balance skills acquisition, knowledge building, and goal pursuits across different age groups. Educational effectiveness should be reframed as the expansion of human developmental capacity, characterized by the simultaneous growth of instrumental abilities and existential capabilities [8]. The Slow Education Framework proposed in Finland offers a copiable solution: guarantee more than 15% of time for personal exploration; establish deferred evaluation mechanisms, like examining learning outcomes after three years; and create intergenerational learning areas where students can talk about goals with adults and elders to foster shared values across generations.

5. Conclusion

The holistic development of young people is a critical aspect of modern education. In the coming years, the curriculum is expected to focus more on skills-based training, potentially leading to a strengthening of traditional material-based education. The shift towards a utilitarian model of education, which emphasizes knowledge acquisition, may overshadow other important educational goals. Conversely, because education's impact on life purpose is harder to measure and often realized later, young people may feel marginalized within the current system.

This imbalance prevents students from developing strong inner motivation and determination. They will struggle to find the long-term motivation to adapt well to society.

Despite recent shifts, the enduring objective of education has been to foster the emotional and responsible growth of individuals. In today's rapidly changing digital age, it is more important than ever to affirm and reinforce life goals. The mission is to return education to its fundamental purpose and help young people thrive in a complex world.

Thinking about the future, it needs more practical experience and research to create an education system that combines professional competence with moral and personal development.

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