# School-based Curriculum Development and School Characteristic Creation

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## Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between school-based curriculum development and the creation of school characteristics, as well as the practical paths. First, it explains that characteristic schools must possess uniqueness, quality, and stability, emphasizing the importance of considering school and student conditions. Then it points out that both are interdependent, with the school-based curriculum serving as the carrier of characteristics, and characteristics determining curriculum direction, forming a virtuous cycle. Finally, it illustrates how to build characteristic schools through school-based curriculum development in four steps: positioning, development, implementation, and evaluation.

## Keywords

## 1. Overview of Characteristic Schools

Both the Outline for Educational Reform and Development in China (1993) and the National Medium- and Long-Term Plan for Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) (2010) clearly propose that schools should "develop their own characteristics". Moreover, "establishing characteristic high schools and promoting school characteristic development" became a key point in the Ministry of Education's 2010 work plan. Additionally, the "Research Project on Characteristic Senior High Schools," which exists as a special research topic, was launched by the Planning Office and organized expert evaluations to select 100 project schools and 200 cultivation schools to promote the construction of characteristic senior high schools. Meanwhile, the establishment of characteristic kindergartens, primary schools, and junior high schools has also become a focus of educational development. Exploring the development path of characteristic school running is beneficial for comprehensively implementing the Party's education policy and implementing quality education. Promoting the construction of characteristic schools through characteristic educational research, gradually forming and highlighting distinctive school characteristics in characteristic school running practices, creating rich spaces for students' autonomous development, and

enhancing the international competitiveness of China's basic education have become urgent tasks for basic education reform and development[1].

From an etymological perspective, "characteristic" carries dual meanings of "uniqueness" and "excellence". The "Modern Chinese Dictionary" defines "characteristic" as the unique form, color, and style manifested by things. As an ancient saying goes, "The unique superiority of things is called characteristic." Thus, "characteristic" refers to something that stands out due to its distinctive and excellent qualities. The essential connotation of "characteristic" encompasses two dimensions: "uniqueness" and "quality"[2]. Research on the concept of "school characteristics" began in 1993. In "Preliminary Discussion on Building Characteristic Schools," Zhao Fuqing defined characteristic schools as "schools that demonstrate a Unique School-running style, distinctive educational philosophies, and distinctive teaching methods over long-term educational processes.[3]"

In Zheng Youxun's "Interpreting Characteristic Schools," the concept of characteristic schools is defined as follows: "In China, a characteristic school generally refers to those schools that, in the process of fully implementing educational policies, under the deliberate pursuit of the subject, over an extended period of time, develop unique characteristics in certain aspects that distinguish them from other schools. These schools form relatively stable and distinctive personalities, achieve outstanding results, and gain social recognition.[4]"

Wang Wei pointed out in "School Characteristic Development: Connotation, Conditions, Problems and Approaches" that school characteristics are relational, attributive, and object-oriented concepts, possessing uniqueness, quality, and stability[5].

From this, we can see that: a characteristic school refers to an educational institution that, within the broader educational context, adheres to national education policies. Through the leadership of the principal and the joint efforts of all faculty, staff, and students, over long-term educational practice, it develops distinctive, stable, developmental, and differential characteristics that set it apart from other schools.

School characteristics are developed through a long-term process. In the broader educational context, schools follow national education policies and, through principal leadership and the joint efforts of all faculty, staff, and students, develop distinctive, stable, developmental, and differentiating features over extended educational practice. When building school characteristics, two key points should be noted: First, schools must base their development on their own actual conditions. By considering their historical development, school positioning, and practical realities, schools can leverage their strengths and deeply explore their potential to create unique characteristics. Second, schools must focus on their students' learning situation. As educational institutions, schools exist primarily to educate and nurture students, who are the main body of the school. The ultimate goal of creating school characteristics lies in promoting comprehensive and personalized student development. Only in this way can school characteristics truly demonstrate their intended significance and value[6].

## 2. The Relationship between School-based Curriculum Development and School Characteristic Creation

School-based curriculum development and school characteristic creation are inherently related. There are various ways to define school-based curriculum development. Since each school is a unique entity, school-based curricula vary from school to school, better highlighting their respective educational characteristics[7]. Thus, school-based curriculum development and school characteristic creation share isomorphic fundamental principles.

### 2.1. School-based curriculum development is an important carrier and core approach for building school characteristics.

As the core component of school work, curriculum and teaching are the key foundation for creating school characteristics. Only by developing distinctive curriculum and teaching features can we provide students with broader development opportunities and truly demonstrate school characteristics. Curriculum reform is the key to educational reform [8]. All educational reforms must ultimately be implemented through curriculum. Any school characteristics require specific curriculum support. China implements a three-level curriculum

management system. In school-based curriculum development, teachers, as the main developers, have complete autonomous decision-making power from curriculum design to evaluation, which naturally places the responsibility of creating school characteristics on school-based curriculum development.

Without the support of school-based curriculum, school characteristics may degenerate into "slogan-like features". Some schools claim to have "technological innovation" as their characteristic, but their efforts only remain at organizing science festivals and posting promotional posters, lacking systematic school-based courses such as "Robot Programming" and "Scientific Inquiry Methods". Ultimately, this superficial approach makes it difficult for these characteristics to truly impact student development.

## 2.2. School characteristics provide direction and core for school-based curriculum.

The core concept of school characteristics defines the development scope for school-based curriculum, ensuring the focus of the curriculum system. On one hand, school-based curriculum needs to be based on the school's unique educational philosophy, training objectives, and areas of excellence. Through systematic assessment of school and community characteristic resources, a curriculum system with differentiation and selectivity should be developed. On the other hand, school characteristics must be realized through the support of characteristic courses. Successful cases at home and abroad (such as American magnet schools and Shanghai Jianping High School) have proven that characteristic courses are an important carrier for creating school characteristics[9].

Without the guidance of school characteristics, school-based curriculum may become" blind exploration". Some schools, in pursuit of quantity, have simultaneously developed more than ten types of school-based courses including calligraphy, basketball, programming, pottery, etc. These courses lack internal connections, which not only increases teachers' burden but also makes it difficult for students to develop stable interests and specialties. This "miscellaneous" approach to curriculum development is essentially a loss of direction caused by the lack of characteristic guidance.

## 2.3. These two aspects mutually reinforce each other, creating a virtuous cycle.

This two-way interaction is reflected in three levels: First, school-based curriculum development, by emphasizing individual student differences and community needs, can fully develop potential educational resources and demonstrate the school's unique characteristics. Second, curriculum autonomy serves as the institutional foundation for school characteristics. Only by breaking through the traditional top-down curriculum management model can schools build distinctive curriculum systems. Third, there is a symbiotic relationship between characteristic courses and school features. They must be based on characteristic resource assessment for development while serving the dual needs of community development and student growth. Therefore, school-based curriculum development is not only a practical path for forming school characteristics but also a curriculum transformation process of characteristic educational concepts. The two achieve dynamic unity through the decentralization of curriculum power and the integration of characteristic resources[10].

In the context of deepening educational reform, "one school, one specialty" and "characteristic development" have become important directions for primary and secondary schools. As a curriculum form independently developed by schools, school-based curriculum has an inseparable dialectical relationship with school characteristic creation. School-based curriculum development and school characteristic creation are the "two wings of one body" for school personalized development. Without the support of school-based curriculum, school characteristics will become castles in the air; without the guidance of school characteristics, school-based curriculum will fall into blind exploration. In educational practice, schools need to grasp the dialectical relationship between the two, develop soulful school-based curriculum under the guidance of characteristic concepts, and refine rooted school characteristics based on curriculum practice. Only in this way can we truly achieve the educational goal of "establishing schools through characteristics and educating people through curriculum", and provide students with personalized and high-quality educational experiences.

# 3. How to Develop School-based Curriculum and Create Distinctive Schools

The development of school-based curriculum and the establishment of distinctive schools form an organic whole. This requires scientific positioning to set the direction, systematic development to build the carrier, effective implementation to put into practice, and comprehensive evaluation to ensure quality. These four elements are interlocking, collectively forming a complete closed loop for distinctive school development. The following will elaborate in detail from these four dimensions.

## 3.1. Positioning: Based on resource endowments, highlighting differential advantages

Positioning serves as the "compass" for creating characteristic schools, determining the direction and depth of school-based curriculum development. Its core lies in deeply exploring the unique resources of schools and communities, identifying their differentiated advantages, and laying a solid foundation for subsequent curriculum development.

### 3.1.1. Deeply explore and utilize school community resources to build a distinctive foundation.

Schools are not isolated educational units but "cultural organisms" rooted in the soil of their communities. The natural environment, cultural heritage, and industrial resources in the community are all valuable materials for school-based curriculum development and natural genes for forming school characteristics.

From the perspective of natural resources, suburban schools can develop ecological education courses based on mountains, forests, wetlands, farmlands, etc. For example, Rizhao City in Shandong Province is adjacent to the birthplace of Dongyi culture. Schools can develop school-based courses based on Dongyi culture to inherit and promote excellent traditional Chinese culture.

From the perspective of cultural and industrial resources, urban schools can connect with museums, time-honored brands, intangible cultural heritage workshops, and other community resources. As reported by CCTV Education Channel, a school has developed a silk production-themed curriculum based on local community resources. This initiative not only helps students inherit their hometown's traditional industry and acquire practical skills but also assists local silk factories in gaining market share, achieving symbiotic development between the school and the community[11].

Campus resources serve as another crucial basis for positioning. Schools with a long history can explore the spiritual heritage in their school history. For instance, a century-old middle school in Beijing has compiled alumni achievements and educational traditions since its founding, developing school history into curriculum resources and constructing a distinctive curriculum system.

### 3.1.2. Deepen understanding of curriculum resources and highlight differential advantages

The richness and relevance of curriculum resources directly determine the uniqueness and feasibility of distinctive positioning. We must break away from the narrow perception of "textbooks as the sole resource" and reconstruct our resource perspective from three dimensions: "human, material, and environmental". Particular emphasis should be placed on the value of differentiated resources.

Differences are the core element of characteristics. Every school has natural differences in its faculty structure, student body characteristics, and educational resources. These differences are precisely the "rich mines" for forming characteristics. Curriculum development must proceed from the school's actual situation, base itself on school characteristics, develop students' specialties, leverage teachers' strengths, and promote the formation and development of school characteristics[12] .

The diversification of resource forms is key to positioning. Teachers' teaching personalities, teachers' and students' life experiences, and even the school's physical space can all be transformed into curriculum resources. This prevents the phenomenon of extensive curriculum resources being difficult to process and transform in a timely manner and integrate into primary and secondary school teaching practice, avoiding the idleness of curriculum resources and the burial of resource value[13].

The positioning process essentially answers the question: "What unique growth experiences can the

school provide for students?" Only by leveraging resources and highlighting differences can a distinctive positioning both "take root deeply" and "stand firmly."

## 3.2. Development: Establish management systems and standardize development processes

School-based curriculum development serves as a "bridge" for implementing distinctive positioning. Through a scientific management system and standardized development process, it transforms positioning into specific curriculum content and implementation plans.

### 3.2.1. Establish a school-based management system to ensure autonomy in development.

Under the traditional "bureaucratic" management model, schools lack autonomy in curriculum development, and teachers passively execute instructions, making it difficult to develop distinctive features. School-based curriculum development requires the establishment of a "school-centered, full participation" management system, granting teachers curriculum decision-making power to stimulate development vitality[14].

The flattened design of the management structure is key. Schools can establish a three-level management system consisting of a "Curriculum Development Leading Group, Curriculum Research and Development Center, and Discipline Project Teaching and Research Group": The leading group, composed of the principal, teacher representatives, and parent committee members, is responsible for setting the curriculum direction; the research and development center assumes functions such as curriculum planning and resource coordination; and the teaching and research group specifically handles curriculum design and implementation. The refined design of institutional guarantees serves as the support. Schools need to develop systems such as the "School-based Curriculum Development Guide" and "Teacher Curriculum Development Incentive Measures," clarifying the standards, processes, and reward and punishment mechanisms for curriculum development. The core value of the management system lies in transforming teachers from "curriculum implementers" to "curriculum creators," making school-based curriculum development a genuine internal need for teacher professional growth.

### 3.2.2. Standardize curriculum development process to ensure course quality

School-based curriculum development is not a random "creative patchwork", but a systematic engineering process that follows four stages: "assessment, objectives, organization, and evaluation". Each stage has specific tasks and standards.

The evaluation phase serves as the foundation of curriculum development, requiring comprehensive analysis of students' needs, resource conditions, and alignment with school positioning. Schools can conduct surveys and hold discussion sessions to understand students' interests, hobbies, and developmental needs. Meanwhile, they should assess whether existing resources can support curriculum development, providing clear evidence for curriculum design. The goal-setting phase needs to clarify the educational value and specific indicators of the curriculum. Curriculum goals should highly align with the school's distinctive characteristics, avoiding "features for the sake of features". The organization phase involves the specific design of curriculum content and implementation strategies. School-based courses can be categorized by learning methods: subject-based (e.g., "Fun Math Extension"), activity-based (e.g., "School Drama Club"), and research-based (e.g., "Local Water Resources Survey"). They can also be classified by function: foundational (for all students), developmental (for interest development), and advanced (for cultivating specialties). Standardized development processes ensure that school-based courses are both "distinctive" and "high-quality", preventing them from becoming fragmented "interest activities".

## 3.3. Implementation: Utilizing action research to drive dynamic curriculum optimization

Curriculum implementation is the "last mile" of transforming educational ideals into reality. Teachers need to adopt action research as their methodology, continuously reflect and adjust in their teaching practice, ensuring that the curriculum truly serves student development.

### 3.3.1. Action Research: The Core Path for Teachers as Curriculum Developers

Action research emphasizes "practitioners as researchers."

Teachers identify, analyze, and solve problems during curriculum implementation, achieving integration of "teaching, research, and improvement." This highly aligns with the practical nature of school-based curriculum development. [15]

The deep integration of practice orientation is the primary characteristic of action research. The purpose of school-based curriculum implementation is not to verify theories but to solve practical problems. Situational practice based on field orientation is the key to action research. The physical setting of curriculum implementation (classroom, campus, community) serves as a natural laboratory for research, where teachers must keenly capture educational opportunities within these contexts. Empowerment through power restructuring is the guarantee of action research. Schools need to grant teachers autonomy in adjusting curriculum content and innovating teaching methods. Action research transforms teachers from "curriculum implementers" to "curriculum creators," enabling school-based curricula to continuously improve in practice and truly meet student needs.

### 3.3.2. Diversified Strategies for Curriculum Implementation

The implementation of school-based curriculum needs to break through the limitations of traditional classrooms and adopt flexible and diverse teaching methods, allowing students to develop core competencies through experience, inquiry, and creation.

Project-based learning is an effective approach for research-oriented courses. Activity-based experience is the core of activity-based courses. Discipline integration is an innovative path for discipline-based courses. Integrate distinctive elements into national curriculum to achieve school-based implementation.

### 3.4. Evaluation: Multi-stakeholder Participation for Dynamic Feedback

Evaluation serves as the "navigation system" for continuous optimization of school-based curriculum. Through comprehensive assessment of curriculum development, implementation process and outcomes, it provides improvement basis for creating distinctive schools.

### 3.4.1. Building a Multi-faceted Evaluation System to Ensure Objectivity

School-based curriculum evaluation needs to break through the "single-manager evaluation" model by incorporating multiple stakeholders including teachers, students, parents and community members to evaluate curriculum value from different perspectives.

Student evaluation focuses on learning experience and growth changes. Through "course feedback forms" and "learning portfolios", opinions on course content and teaching methods, as well as gains in knowledge, abilities and emotions are collected. Teacher evaluation emphasizes curriculum development and implementation capabilities. Through "teacher curriculum development logs" and "teaching group peer review", teachers' curriculum design abilities and teaching innovation capabilities are assessed. Parents and community evaluation pay attention to the social value of courses. Parents evaluate the impact of courses on children's development by participating in "course open days"; while the community assesses whether courses promote community resource utilization and cultural heritage from the perspective of "school-community interaction".

### 3.4.2. Improving Evaluation Feedback Mechanism to Drive Curriculum Iteration

The ultimate purpose of evaluation is improvement rather than judgment. A closed-loop mechanism of "evaluation, feedback, adjustment" needs to be established to continuously improve school-based curriculum and school characteristics dynamically.

Periodic evaluations ensure that the curriculum direction remains on track. The school organizes a school-based curriculum review meeting every semester, where the curriculum review committee (including experts, teachers, and parent representatives) conducts a comprehensive evaluation of the curriculum, focusing on whether the curriculum aligns with its distinctive positioning and whether goals have been achieved. Continuous monitoring captures subtle issues in implementation. Through classroom observations and student interviews, real-time understanding of curriculum implementation is gained. School-based curriculum development and distinctive school creation is a process of continuous cycling and spiral improvement involving

"positioning, development, implementation, evaluation". Positioning provides direction for development, development provides a carrier for implementation, implementation accumulates materials for evaluation, and evaluation provides improvement basis for positioning and development. Only by organically integrating these four aspects can school-based curriculum truly become the "flesh and blood" of distinctive schools, and school characteristics become the "soul" guiding student growth, ultimately achieving an educational ecology of "one school, one specialty, each shining in its own way".

## 4. Conclusion

School-based curriculum development is a continuous professional activity of schools, and its development follows a cyclical improvement process of "needs diagnosis—goal positioning—organization and implementation—evaluation and improvement". Only through systematic and standardized management of school-based curriculum can we develop truly valuable courses and ensure the sustainable development of school characteristics.

**Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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