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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TAKING CURRICULUM PERSONALLY: ANALYZING WILLIAM PINAR'S METHOD OF CURRERE AND IMPLICATION IN IMPROVING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EDUCATION IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Currently, the internationalization of higher education has been suggested and implemented as an approach to address the trend of educational globalization. According to international standards for measuring university internationalization, the proportion international students is a basic indicator. Chinese higher education institutions have paid more attention to promoting the enrollment rate of international students. Meanwhile, underlying challenges also have been impacting the improvement of international student education about admission standards, pedagogy, curriculum design, and studentteacher relations. This study attempts to systematically analyze William Pinar's method of Currere as a theoretical framework and probe its implication in improving international student education in Chinese higher education institutions. Arguably, University teachers with visiting learning experiences abroad may be viewed as the main promoter and practitioner of William Pinar's method of Currere, framing cross-cultural teaching methods and curriculums to elevate the level of international student education.

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Introduction:-

At present, the internationalization of higher education has become the main strategy to deal with the trend of educational globalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit, 2002; Knight, 2008). The internationalization of higher education refers to "incorporating the international and intercultural dimensions into the process of higher education development and delivery" (Knight, 2003, p. 2). To cope with this trend, many national colleges and universities have paid more attention to the international exchange of education. According to international standards for measuring university internationalization, the proportion of international students is a basic indicator (Liu, 2010). Therefore, sending and introducing international students have become an important manifestation of this trend. For example, the growth of overseas education in the United States has been strong. In 2004, more than 190,000 American students studied abroad. U.S. universities continue to strengthen international partnerships and expand alliance agreements, enabling students to study any subjects anywhere in the world (Ogden, 2006). From 2016 to 2017, the international student enrollment rate at public universities in Canada increased by 11.0% (+ 24,315). The total number of international students is 245,895, accounting for 12.0% of the total enrollment (Statistics Canada, 2018). Japanese higher educational institutions also plan to enroll 300,000 international students in 2020 (Liu, 2017). As a major exporter of international students, China has also become a popular destination for study abroad. Due to the gradual improvement of China's overall national strength and cultural influence, more and more foreign students choose China as their platform for higher education (Wu & Du, 2018). Each year, more than 500 Chinese

universities enroll international students. According to the China Education Statistics Yearbook (2016), from 2005 to 2014, the number of freshmen enrolled in Chinese universities increased from 61,000 to 111,000 (an increase of 82%). According to the annual data released by the Chinese Ministry of Education, the total number of international students (academic and non-academic education) has increased from 290,000 to 440,000 from 2011 to 2016. Among them, Shanghai New York University has become the university that receives the most international students. International students account for 42.28% of all students enrolled in this university (Education Statistics Yearbook of China [ESYC], 2016).

More importantly, according to the "National Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan" (2010-2020) promulgated by the State Council, "by 2020, internationally renowned, high-profile, high-level institutions of higher learning will be established. These universities are at or near the level of world-class universities, and the international competitiveness of higher education will be significantly enhanced." (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China [CPGPRC], 2013) This has set clear development goals for the development of Chinese universities. To further implement the objectives of the "Outline", the Ministry of Education has specially formulated the "Study Program for Studying in China." The Plan shows that by 2020, the number of students studying in China will increase to 500,000 (CPGPRC, 2010). This provides a cornerstone and policy guarantee for Chinese universities to accelerate the process of internationalization, to reach the level of world-class universities, and to enhance international competitiveness.

Nevertheless, in the process of actively promoting international student education in Chinese universities, some negative factors (such as enrollment standards, teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, teacher strengths and so on) are also affecting the benign development and practice of international student education. Relevant research has already explained and analyzed the existing problems. Firstly, the entry threshold is low, which causes the quality of students cannot be guaranteed. The Ministry of Education clearly states that "to expand the scale, optimize the structure, standardize management, and ensure quality" (CPGPRC, 2010). However, in the implementation, "expanding the scale" has been put on the top priority. For example, some colleges and universities expand the recruitment of international students and correspondingly reduce the recruitment of native students. Moreover, when enrolling undergraduate international students, some colleges and universities cancel the written test method and replace it with the application review (Liu, 2017; Tian, 2017). This approach has greatly affected the quality of international students while ensuring the size of international students. Secondly, the curriculum and teaching methods are relatively single and not enough to attract quality students. Most of the international students come from countries with relatively low education levels. Therefore, how to instruct these students is a challenge facing by Chinese colleges and universities (Liu, 2017). Besides, for an international university, international students should account for 10%-20% of the total number of students (Zhang, 2009). For example, the proportion of university students (including academic and non-academic) at the University of Regina, Canada is 10% (University of Regina, 2018). About 40% of graduate students at the University of British Columbia are international students (the University of British Columbia, n.d.). However, most of the international students coming to China view learning the Chinese language as their main purpose. In the Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and other universities, more than 1,000 students are studying Chinese (Zhang, 2009). Therefore, the existing courses are mainly aimed at Chinese teaching. This has led to the inadequacy of academic education curriculums and the neglect of cross-cultural factors. According to the data of the World Education Information Network (2017), for Russian students, the quality of teaching in Chinese universities has not met the expectations of international students. Specifically, (1) generally, the syllabus is simple with low academic requirements for international students; (2) The teachers employed do not have cross-cultural experiences or sufficient international student teaching experiences; (3) The curriculum lacks practicality. (4) Large classes engender that teachers cannot pay attention to students' shortcomings. Thirdly, the existing teaching method does not reflect cross-cultural education. As the key agent in the educational process, university educators should be regarded as the main promoters and practitioners of higher education development. However, in most cases, educators are often in a complex and contradictory position. Because they not only are subject to a fixed teaching program and overall education level, they also become advocates of educational innovation and transformation (Wotherspoon, 2014). In Chinese higher education, university educators are more accustomed to teaching fixed knowledge and skills as the most appropriate teaching method. Therefore, international students likely think that sometimes teachers' indifference to foreign students affects the advancement of the entire teaching process (World Education Information Network, 2017).

Given the above problems, for Chinese universities, exploring cross-cultural and practical courses and teaching methods as well as using teachers with cross-cultural experience is the core of improving the education level of international students. High-quality international teaching practice can be an important guarantee for attracting high-quality international students and promoting the internationalization of Chinese universities. This paper analyzes William Pinar's *Currere* method and uses it as a theoretical framework to deeply explore its significance in developing and improving the international student education in Chinese universities. This may play a certain role in promoting cross-cultural teaching concepts and the internationalization of education in Chinese universities.

Theoretical Framework: William Pinar's Currere Method

As a part of the reconstruction of the American curriculum concept in the early 1970s, Pinar and Grumet (1976) elaborate that the curriculum should be placed in the autobiographical context. They believe that *Currere* should be defined as a concept of autobiography and self-inspection. They suggest *currere*, as the underpinning of a course, should be defined as an autobiographical and self-examining theory instead of a fixed and predestined educational objective. As described by Pinar (2012),

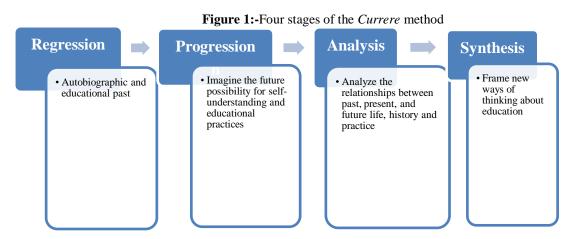
The method of *currere* reconceptualized curriculum from course objectives to a complicated conversation with oneself (as a 'private' intellectual), an ongoing project of self-understanding in which one becomes mobilized for engaged pedagogical action—as a private-and-public intellectual – with others in the social reconstruction of the public sphere. (p.188)

That is, the process of rebuilding the curriculum is linked to academic knowledge, the subjectivity, and self-understanding of students and teachers, and the social and historical context. Moreover, as far as educators concerned, one of the main transformative intellectuals and change-agents of education, it is remarkably valuable to develop an autobiographic reflection on educational experiences from a narrative, subjective, and critical perspective.

Currere (the curriculum in English) comes from Latin which initial meaning is "a running, a race, a course" (Gibson, 2012, p. 2). Here the curriculum merely refers to temporal modality rather than the specified contents. Moreover, theoretically, a curriculum is supposed to be the study of all educational phenomena (Gibson, 2012), which means it may absorb any extrinsic principle for methodological assistance but does not permit methodologies to decide contents. However, gradually, a curriculum is defined as the experiences that shaped children into passive citizens in their future. The curriculum becomes a consolidated and mechanistic standard including teaching materials, methods, fixed evaluation, and standardized tests measuring all students and a set of fixed cultural values that mirrors the mainstream ideology. Currere has transformed from teaching survival skills, both practical and cultural, to emphasizing authoritarianism, conformity and standards-based achievements (Pinar, 2003). As mentioned by Pinar (2012), a curriculum is "often sold as accountability authoritarianism [and] in effect replaces education as a priority" (p. 3). Pinar (2012) also argues that curriculum experts appear to associate currere with standardized test scores so that politicians can facilitate control in what is to be taught in schooling. Hence, Pinar (1975) presents the idea that "the method of *currere* [is] a method that allows us to explore what we have conceptualized through time, the complex relationship between the temporal and conceptual, thus we can discover our self, its evolution and education" (p. 19). In other words, learners and educators no longer merely obey a rigid curriculum model and are shaped by a "positivistic" system (Smith, 2013) but rather underscore how the curriculum can be created, transforming the focus away from the process itself and stressing the outcomes of the prescribed process. Employing emphasizing on the self and her/his relation with the educational world, the integration of a personal journey of understanding, subject matter understanding, and social understanding is more likely to be established.

What is more, Pinar (2012) specifically offers a framework for the autobiographical reflection on educational experiences including four mutually connected benchmarks as followed: regression, progression, analysis, and synthesis, by which *currere* is reconceptualized as "a complicated conversation"(Pinar, 2012, p.45) in the educational world. Specifically, the first step is the regressive, which means "turning to autobiographic and educational past" (Pinar, 1975, p.424) and retelling the stories of educators/learners' educational experiences. This more likely helps individuals engage in self-understanding in the current situation. It is substituted by the progressive stage in which educators/learners turn to imagine the future possibility for self-understanding and educational practices. As mentioned by Smith (2013), as the past can exist in the present, the future also can be displayed in the current subjectivity. The third stage is the analysis which means one needs to reflectively analyze

the relationships between past, present, and future life, history and practice. Exactly as Pinar (1975) points out, the stage finds the answer: "how is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?" (p.12). Finally, the synthetic step is employed by educators/learners to transform fragments of their experiences occurring in the past and present into the broader political and cultural context in order to frame new ways of thinking about education. Furthermore, Pinar (2012) also declares that the four steps may take place at the same time albeit he describes *currere* as a successive process of the four stages.



Educators in Chinese universities should be regarded as the main promoters and practitioners of Pinar's *Currere* method. They usually are equivalent to school education in the process of educational service communication from the perspectives of students, parents, and the public. But they seem to have become accustomed to teaching and adapting teaching methods that focus on disseminating fixed knowledge and skills. Therefore, Pinar's *Currere* method can help educators to record their experiences in teaching practices, creating more practical teaching methods and courses.

More specifically, in the regression phase, educators are encouraged to "re-experiencing" (Pinar, 2012, p. 45) and "free-associative remembrance of the past" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix). In other words, educators should remember their specific educational experiences because these experiences can be used as basic information for their self-reflection. Educators can describe their educational experiences in their languages. For example, Aubrey, an educator candidate, strengthened her interrogations of knowledge and schooling through her autobiographic inquiries (Beierling, Buitenhuis, Grant, & Hanson, 2014) as follows:

It's in grade five. We're doing flags about who we are, with pictures about where we come from. I...am trying to tell my teacher about being part Native. She is helping me figure out what to draw for that. We decide I should put a Canadian flag. To me, Canadian means both-European people and Native people. If your family is in Canada, you come from both. Everyone is part Native. My teacher tells me that this is not true, that I am the only one in the class. She seems pleased with what I've told her. I look at the other kids. If they are not part Native, where did they come from...Maybe Canadian doesn't mean what I thought. (p.5)

The memory make her explicit further about the cultural identity of Métis in Canada and the role of school curriculums in the group.

The progression phase offers possibilities for the future through "free association" (Smith, 2013, p. 6). As Pinar (1975) points out, "think of the future, of tomorrow, of next week, of the new few months, of the next academic year, of the next three years and so on"(p.25). Pinar (2012) also mentions two types of exploration in the step, namely: "stylistic experimentation" and "thematic imagining" (p.25). "Stylistic experimentation" or writing can promote educators to image the future picture of the curriculum with a connection to their current teaching experiences. Meanwhile, "thematic imagining" more likely provides an opportunity for educators to rethink the themes that have repeatedly occurred in their teaching practices and discern the urgent goals and commitments shaping their works and lives. An illustration of the point can be made that Jennifer Hauver James (n.d.), an

associate professor of the Department of Educational Theory & Practice at the University of Georgia, called for self-examination of teachers as an effective approach to address greater social justice in education. According to him:

When my students (prospective teachers) leave me, they will assume responsibility for roughly 20-25 children a year who may hail from different backgrounds, who represent a wide variety of experiences, whose families are as diverse as they are numerous. And so though I wish for my prospective teachers to have the freedom to determine the professional and personal identities they will inhabit... (p.168)

Therefore, the future can be demonstrated in the current subjectivity of educators. By asking themselves what will be happening, educators can figure out the more profound goals that they need to achieve in terms of education and are hoped to guide their current teaching.

The analysis phase helps educators self-reflectively analyze the past and the future to understand their internal relationships. The "critical self-examination of the past and present seeks to understand the multiple facets of an educational experience" (Pinar, 2012, p. 36). In this process, educators can deeply understand the interrelationship between academic knowledge, social backgrounds, self-formation processes, and life experiences. Butt, Townsend, and Raymond (1990) also point out that educators should ask themselves four questions namely: "what is the nature of my working reality? How do I think and act in that context and why? How through my work life and personal history, did I come to be that way? How do I wish to be in my professional reality?"(p.257) Via answering these questions, educators can reasonably perform a self-understanding.

In the synthetic moment, educators are expected to synthesize the generative data from the previous three steps to understand the meaning of the data and extract new pedagogy guiding their current teaching activities and creating a transformative educational environment. As Pinar (2012) argues, "there needs to be a re-engagement with the idea of 'complicated conversation', characterized by a moral intransigence, to undo the deleterious effects of what he calls 'school reform'"(as cited by Smith, 2013, p.5). For instance, Helen Armstrong, a professor at Brandon University, figures out that storytelling is an important teaching tool for Aboriginal students in classrooms. Such an outcome is derived from the analysis of her past teaching experience and the prediction of the future educational orientation of Aboriginal children. Specifically, Armstrong (2013) says that "the stories that denigrate Aboriginal peoples have a strong life, particularly when those stories are ingested, adopted as one's own, and begin to flow within the lived experience of Aboriginal peoples, destroying hope and crushing dreams" (p.43). Then, she foresees if indigenizing the school curriculum could make Aboriginal children see their stories validated within schools. She thinks that the connection between Aboriginal ways of cognition and curriculum might promote their increased attendance and enrollment in schooling until their graduation (Armstrong, 2013). The method has been found out to be the most effective teaching tool not only for Aboriginal students but also all students in classrooms (Osborne, 2000). Thereby, the stage more likely helps educators reorient the curriculum and establishes a more rational learning environment.

However, if educators cannot understand their relationship with the things around them, they cannot understand themselves. As Jardine (1994) points out, "ownership of 'my story 'is a peculiar notion if considered ecologically" (p. 9). Therefore, if autobiographical educators uncritically extract their experiences related to social background, they may fall into the dilemma of self-indulgence. Moreover, the *Currere* method is derived from the Western system of thinking so cultural and contextual factors should be given more consideration when it is applied to the Eastern education system. As Smith (2013) points out, autobiographical educators should critically reflect personal experiences and pay more attention to the relationship between self-test and society to avoid self-indulgence. Besides, he believes that critical pedagogy can play an active role in this process and solve some of the potential problems caused by the *Currere* method.

Application of William Pinar's Currere Method to International Student Education in Chinese Universities

International students in China also have to face cultural conflicts, challenges, and obstacles from language, academic skills, life, and socialization. Therefore, international students need to develop cross-cultural learning ability (Citron, 2001). In other words, academic programs should be designed as a means for international students to learn about new cultures and societies and to explore cultural differences. Based on the analysis above, the *Currere* method focuses on the self-test of educators and learners as well as the analysis and integration of personal experiences. Therefore, educators with cross-cultural education experiences are more likely to use the *Currere* approach to develop international students' cross-cultural learning skills.

Under the trend of internationalization of higher education, many countries have sent a large number of university educators as visiting scholars to go abroad for short-term visits and exchanges. China as the largest developing country is no exception from the trend. In 2018, the Chinese government has sent about 3,500 senior researchers and visiting professors (China Scholarship Council [CSC], 2017) to those countries with developed education, science, and technology, well-known research institutions, and laboratories. The visiting period is usually 3-12 months. The China Scholarship Council (CSC) provides much necessary support, including transportation, accommodation, and health care (CSC, 2017). In recent years, the number of visiting professors from Chinese universities has exceeded that of other countries (Shimmi, 2014). For example, from 2006 to 2009, the number of Chinese university educators visiting in the United States increased from 1,482 to 2,792 (Shimmi, 2014). In Canada, the number of Chinese visiting professors is also increasing. At the University of Regina, there are approximately 58 visiting professors from various fields (90% of them are from China) (Li Liu, personal communication, December 5, 2017). They are in both educational contexts (China and visiting countries) and are exposed to different educational methods, perspectives, and ideas. Therefore, Chinese visiting professors are in a dual cultural environment. On the one hand, they are used to Chinese teaching methods. On the other hand, they must also participate in discussion-based teaching and presentations as well as develop individuality and critical thinking during the visit. This allows them to fully appreciate the differences between the two educational methods and cultures. Therefore, this group is more likely to become a practitioner of William Pinar's Currere method and an indispensable resource for promoting and enhancing the education of international students in Chinese universities.

Firstly, regression. Visiting educators can review and document their overseas experiences and teaching practices. For example, how do they face predictable language barriers and unpredictable cultural conflicts? And how do they fit into different classroom cultures? Based on these questions, educators can use a story-telling form to inspire international students' cross-cultural learning awareness and cognition. As mentioned by one of the interviewed professors in one of the researcher's studies (Ge, 2019)

...I have been back for 3 months and I have some deep understanding. For example, at Canadian universities, they hold weekly meetings of scientific results and work reports. I think this way is quite good. This approach can help teachers guide students promptly. I think this is very beneficial to the students... (p.94)

Another interviewed professor also talked about his visit experience (Ge, 2019).

...At the beginning, I needed to adapt to the new environment and collective life. I had to cook for myself. But fortunately, I was quite good at cooking. Due to the inconvenience of transportation, we had to drive to the university. I barely went to college this semester because I didn't find a course I liked. I like to be alone because I can think about some issues. I rarely communicate with local people. My friend circle mainly includes Chinese people. I have not participated in other social activities other than attending the International Night of the University... (p.92)

Secondly, progression. Based on the summary of the regression phase, educators can think about how to combine the local education culture with the education method that is more suitable for international students. For example, some visiting scholars have hypothesized some possible models, such as applied teaching models, interactive teaching models, encouraging student connections with society, and general education (Ge, 2019). These crosscultural approaches can guide international students to more actively recognize their learning and communication processes and develop successful cross-cultural interactions (Gundykunst, 1991), to be more open to new information and to recognize multiple possibilities.

Thirdly, analysis. Educators can further reflect on and analyze the past overseas experiences and future educational ideas, and find potential problems from multiple perspectives. For example, a visiting professor mentioned that in the classroom teaching, the dialogue and interaction between teachers and students also could be introduced, but it could not affect the completion of the fixed course. Moreover, some lazy behaviors and exotic costumes of foreign students were not allowed to appear in Chinese classrooms. Chinese teachers and traditions could not accept this form of freedom (Ge, 2019). Also, as mentioned by another interviewee (Ge, 2019),

I have found that the teaching of foreign universities is very application-oriented. They focus on developing students' practical abilities. For some mechanics courses, classroom teaching does not emphasize the derivation of equations but focuses on practical applications. Some Chinese universities have begun to change in this direction. But if it needs to be universally implemented, it will not be easy. (p.94)

Finally, synthesis. Educators can extract new pedagogies and courses that guide their current teaching activities by synthesizing the results of the first three steps. Specifically, as mentioned above, these visiting educators have experienced unpredictable cultural barriers and conflicts in teaching methods. Therefore, based on the existing curriculum, they can design some experimental courses such as personal experience and situational introduction. These courses focus on helping international students truly participate in cross-cultural experiences and learn about different cultural perspectives. Moreover, these educators should try to balance the two forms of teaching -- lectures and seminars. Educators who have had experiences of visiting abroad can try to organize seminars and public lectures for international students to stimulate students' critical thinking and establish a more equal teacher-student relationship.

Conclusion:-

In summary, Pinar's *Currere* approach focuses on self-examination through academic research and teaching practices. This provides educators with an opportunity to understand their professional and personal lives while developing autobiographical teaching. Moreover, educators should pay more attention to critically examining their experiences and linking them to broader human emotional development and social context. Therefore, in the process of promoting international student education in China, Pinar's *Currere* method can be an effective and valuable effort. In particular, educators with visiting experiences abroad can provide more effective cross-cultural courses and pedagogies for international students who are also facing cultural conflicts based on their cross-cultural educational experiences, promoting their academic ability and academic success, and the rapid development of international student education in Chinese universities.

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