Exploring the Implementation of 4-H in High School’s Curriculum Reform

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Abstract
As the largest out of school youth development program in the U.S., 4-H has accumulated abundant experience in the theory and practice of quality youth education. In terms of school enrichment, 4-H sheds light on China’s national curriculum reform in elementary and secondary schools that emphasizes students’ overall development and life skills. Learning from 4-H can provide valuable insights for Chinese teachers and educators in developing expanded courses, which is an important part of the second cycle curriculum reform.

This article briefly explores curriculum reform in Shanghai’s elementary and secondary schools as well as issues in the implementation. It examines the features of 4-H, in terms of its organization and learning model and practice, with an emphasis on the advantages that 4-H can bring to facilitate the curriculum reform. The article reports the first implementation of a 4-H project in a high school in Shanghai as a joint effort between Shanghai Sanda University and University of Illinois Extension. Finally, the author summarizes the implementation and its implications. After carefully considering the context, the author concludes that integrating 4-H projects into the expanded courses can be an effective way to improve Chinese students’ learning interests, leadership and life skills.

1. Introduction
The first cycle curriculum reform of Shanghai secondary schools proposed that new curriculum should center on improving students’ overall quality and integrate social needs, student development and a school’s disciplinary system (the Shanghai Education Commission, 1988). Furthermore, the educational objectives in the new curriculum explicitly include the requirements for the development of students’ personality, social-emotional health and life skills. In the second cycle curriculum reform, which started in 1998 with the issuance of the Executive Outlines for Elementary and Secondary Education Reform in Shanghai in the 21st Century, the emphasis was on “quality education with the students’ development as its core.” (the Shanghai Education Commission, 1998). The new curriculum system proposes that
emphasis be placed on ethics, innovation, practical skills, information and technology skills, experiential learning and the personal development of each student. The second cycle curriculum reform proposes that a revision, of the difficult, obscure and less-innovative traditional curriculum, include a combination of the fundamental courses, the expanded course, and research-oriented courses. These courses will focus on students’ overall development, enhance links between the courses and student life and development in society and students, and increase interest in learning. (the Shanghai Education Commission, 1998).

Therefore, the development of the expanded courses becomes an important part of the curriculum reform in Shanghai elementary and secondary schools. According to the Outline and Guide for Expanded courses in Shanghai Elementary and Secondary Schools (1998), expanded courses were designed to cultivate good character, foster leadership and students’ pro-activeness, perfect their cognitive development, and practice useful skills. As school-based expanded courses are developed, schools should focus on cultivating, motivating and developing students’ interests, learning skills, potential, and personality and thus make the school reform characteristics take shape. At present, key elementary and secondary schools in Shanghai are conducting experimental expanded courses and trying to identify a specific teaching model for promotion (Wang, 2003).

Though the curriculum reforms have a definite agenda for the expanded course, the current theoretical research and practical studies on school-based expanded courses still lag because they are lacking specific empirical studies and the development of high-quality teaching resources. Currently, the related research and practice are limited within a small number of key schools in the developed areas, such as Beijing, Shanghai, etc. (Pan, 2007).

As the largest out of school youth development education program in the U.S. and one of the main forms of the character education of youngsters in America (Wen, 2008), 4-H has accumulated valuable experience in the theory and practice of quality youth education during its 100 years, including the experiential learning model, abundant teaching resources and curriculum that integrates the wisdom of educators
and volunteer workers. All these can certainly shed light on the research and practice of the expanded curriculum in China. With the increasing emphasis on quality youth education, Chinese educators can selectively learn from and use the theory and resources of 4-H youth development education, which will help to carry out the expanded courses in high schools.

2. 4-H Youth Development Education

2.1 Introduction of 4-H

4-H is the abbreviation that stands for Head, Heart, Hands and Health, indicating a comprehensive positive development of youth. 4-H takes the four-leaf clover as its logo which contains four green leaves with white “H”s to stand for the simultaneous and coordinated development of head, heart, hands, and health. The 4-H program originated from the early training and education of extracurricular skills for rural teenagers. After more than 100 years of development, it gradually became the youth extracurricular education program across the United States (National 4-H Headquarters, 2008). With the purpose of developing leadership, character, and good citizenship in America’s youth, 4-H relies on public and private resources, provides practice and learning opportunities for youngsters with different backgrounds and experiences, and helps them expand their potential and live an active life.

Figure 1. The Logo of 4-H—the Four-leaf Clover

The main forms of the 4-H program are community-based 4-H clubs and school enrichment projects. The program is jointly administered by the United States Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities and local 4-H offices, assisted by
local volunteers (National 4-H Headquarters, 2008). Youngsters can attend 4-H activities by joining 4-H clubs, educational camps, off-campus training programs, etc. In 4-H, the youngsters get to know communities by participating in various kinds of activities and cultivating competencies in leadership, citizenship, life skills and communication (National 4-H Headquarters, 2009). 4-H works to expand its impact by publicly displaying the work of 4-H members and highlighting the educational practices, such as experiential learning. By exhibiting the achievements and character building of its youth 4-H has attracted more public attention, participation and devotion. Every year, the U. S. state and county level 4-H organizations provide exhibit opportunities for 4-H youth at state and county fairs. These exhibits are examples of the work the youth have done throughout the year, the skills they’ve gained and the knowledge they have learned. Government officials, social celebrities, industrialists, parents of students and others are invited to share the joy of young people’s success and understand the contributions 4-H has made to the community and youth development. 4-H is not only pervasive in American rural and urban areas, but has also expanded in many parts of the world (National 4-H Headquarters, 2009). The number of members, participants and volunteers continue to grow.

2.2 4-H Experiential Development Education

The core of the 4-H youth development program is the experiential learning model, that is “learning by doing”. It advocates and encourages youngsters to practice by doing and then think and innovate independently as they practice. The experiential learning model is a teaching model in which the teacher creates actual or simulated situations and opportunities for students to independently learn and test their own knowledge as they gain skills through personal practice. As they practice they can become truly independent, perceptive, practical and innovative active learners. This experiential learning model has helped 4-H to become the leading non-formal educational organization, as well as an important supplement to formal education of schools. In 4-H, youth can practice what they learn from books and school. When the inductive knowledge and theories students have learned in the classroom are
combined with the perceptual knowledge they have acquired in 4-H youth development activities, their interest in learning is stimulated which further enhances the learning. The experiential learning model of the 4-H youth development program consists of three components: 1) to do, students experience and participate in activities, 2) to reflect, students share their experience and knowledge, discuss and analyze the results; 3) to apply, students deepen and broaden the understanding of concepts and strengthen knowledge gained through summarization and application (Carlson, 1998).

As for the learning process, 4-H experiential learning can be divided into five stages: to experience, to share, to process, to generalize, and to apply (Keith, 2001). The model is composed of a five step experiential learning cycle: to experience? to share? to process? to generalize? to apply. The reflection and application of the 4-H experiential learning activities result in the generation of new concepts, assumptions and perception. This has stimulated students’ interest in further practice and exploration, and also launched a new rotation of the experiential learning cycle.

2.3 The Practice of 4-H Youth Development Education

4-H emphasizes the training of students’ leadership through learning, practicing and sometimes teaching practical skills. In Illinois, the state 4-H administration has developed an activity plan manual, the “Illinois Clover”. It lists the projects available to 4-H members with examples of learning activities and the requirements for completing each project. The youngsters can choose to participate in certain projects based on their interests and needs. During the activities, youth communicate with 4-H volunteers who are mainly retired teachers, professional scholars, or 4-Hers’ parents or teens. These volunteers give students personal help and guidance. 4-H members implement and complete the projects. At the end of the project, the participants write an activity report including the reasons for participation, what they have learned, and their own reflection and description of the activity results. 4-Hers take their work to the county fair where they introduce and show their projects to the public and get an assessment from judges. The judges recommend the outstanding projects be taken to
the state fair where the projects are displayed and judged. It can be seen that through the 4-H youth development program youngsters have not only broadened their knowledge, but also exercised their knowledge as they applied it to specific projects and life skills. During their communication with volunteers and judges, as well as their public speeches, 4-Hers’ social responsibility and communication skills are enhanced. At the same time, the well-prepared projects can receive recognition and praise from the community and parents, enhancing the youngsters’ motivation to further participate in 4-H activities and community-service.

Besides the emphasis on individual success and development, 4-H is closely linked with classroom education. One of its major approaches is the enrichment of school curricula. 4-H club activities are different from the formal school education in the operational mode, curriculum setting, and implementation approach. But they complement each other and share basic objectives, namely, to promote the youngsters’ positive development of academic and life skills. The knowledge students have learned in the classroom can be experienced and better understood with 4-H projects. For example, the youth may only learn the knowledge of a basic electrical circuit from a textbook in junior high, but they get excited about relevant activities of producing a circuit board or electric switch in 4-H activities. After registering in the corresponding projects, they receive guidance from experienced volunteers on how to make circuits and switches that can actually be used. In this way, students can practice what they have learned in the classroom and apply them into real life. The 4-H youth development program has become a good complement to formal teaching by providing the opportunity to link the theory to practice.

In addition, 4-H provides a lot of teaching resources for schools to use. These curricular resources are developed jointly by professional curriculum specialists, Extension educators, and school teachers with the support of 4-H administration. One area of focus is character education. In order to satisfy schools’ requests for quality experiential learning activities that meet students’ interests, 4-H developed hundreds of character education lesson plans. Each lesson contains the objective, step-by-step instructions, experiential learning discussion questions, and evaluation. Most projects
include a teacher’s guide and student exercise books (Illinois University Extension, 2009). *Terrific Teachable Moments* is one of character development resources for teachers to use. It provides a variety of activities to help the youth from pre-kindergarten to grade 12 to make positive character choices.

To summarize, the goal of 4-H is accordant with the requirements of the “second cycle” curriculum reform in Shanghai. Therefore, by learning from the 4-H experiential learning and its resources and applying them into the development and practice of China’s school’s expanded courses, students’ ability to understand and master important information and skills are strengthened.

3. Exploration of 4-H in the Expanded course of the High School

3.1 General Situation of the School

Founded in 1944, Shanghai Luhang high school is an exemplary high school in Pudong District. It has about 200 teaching staff and more than 2,400 students. Adhering to the educational goals of “highly-qualified teachers and students, high-quality teaching, and high-grade culture”, the school enjoys a good reputation among the high schools in Pudong District. Luhang high school is actively involved in the “second cycle” curriculum reform in Shanghai, and vigorously carries out the research and development of the school-based curriculum. “Moral self-cultivation”, “productive labor technology”, and “the popularization of national arts” are the preponderant courses in the school’s curriculum. Representative courses are “National Arts Education for High School Students” and “Extensive Reading on Arts Education for High School Students.” At the same time, the school attaches great importance to the quality education and developmental training of students. In particular, the achievements in research and teaching by applying national arts that promotes quality education are in a leading position in China.

Sanda University is the first full-time private university with an undergraduate degree program in Shanghai. Since its founding in 1992, it has adhered to the mission “honesty, rigorous educational management, and high educational quality toward and for society”. The school’s goals of cultivating talents that meet the demands of the
times and utilizing the school's educational resources and students’ professional advantage to repay society require long-term efforts of educators in Sanda. By the end of 2005, under the coordination of Education Department of City Development Bureau in Pudong District, Sanda University and Luhang high school had jointly carried out an extracurricular program, called Reading Program. The program is an attempt to build a model of homeland English learning under the university’s supervision and the high school’s cooperation. With the teaching philosophy of expanding high school students’ thinking and fostering their character development, the teachers and the students in English Department of Sanda have made full use of their professional knowledge to introduce English language and culture knowledge to Luhang students. Meanwhile, Sanda helps develop school-based expanded courses in English. In the past three years of cooperation, both parties have adhered to the educational philosophy of “learning by doing, and doing while learning.” Their new model of mutual advantage and reciprocity between the university and high schools has achieved satisfactory results.

3.2 The Practice of 4-H in Expanded Course of High School

In early 2008, Sanda University established a cooperative relationship with University of Illinois Extension, U.S. The two sides exchanged ideas and experiences on youth development, and the feasibility of promoting 4-H in youth education by exchanging visiting scholars, seminars and sharing information.

In order to further implement 4-H in China, Sanda University tried to integrate 4-H into the expanded courses in Luhang High School. Taking into account the need of the school and students’ interests, a 4-H project, “Passport to the World” was adopted as a school-based expanded course in the fall semester of 2008. The project aimed to help high school students in China acquire information and knowledge about different countries and cultures through the experiential learning approach. Students who participated in the project were expected to learn teamwork, independent learning, public presentation, etc. It was also hoped that students would gradually foster the intrinsic motivation of learning English through the process of researching
and understanding other cultures. The project was also an attempt at helping Chinese teachers improve their performance in facilitating school-based curriculum and extracurricular activities to students.

Forty senior high school freshmen, aged 16 to 17, participated in the project. They had fine command of English and their academic grades were above average. However, their motivation to learn English was comparatively low and most of them did not have much experience in self study, research or teamwork. Their sense of teamwork was not sufficient. Two Sanda students worked closely with the high school students as facilitators and organizers. University teachers and high school teachers, as well as Illinois 4-H educators worked with and provided information and curriculum tools to the junior leaders.

The participants were divided into five groups. Each group had to choose a study country to do their research. At the end of the project, each group was expected to complete a “passport” that contained all of the information they had found about the target country, present their work in public and have their work evaluated by judges. Two Sanda students, as junior leaders, met with the participants once a week, helping the participants complete the project. The weekly 40 minute meetings involved lecturing, group discussions, presentation, and group work. Participants actually did most of the research in their spare time after school.

The whole project was completed in ten class periods. In each class, Sanda junior leaders applied the 4-H experiential learning model to create an atmosphere of active participation and learning. For example, in the final stage of the project, junior leaders gave instructions and explanations on how to make the “passport” and how to make a public speech. The Luhang participants completed the task of collecting relevant information and making the passport by using their extracurricular time. In addition, junior leaders supervised and helped to guide the progress and team cooperation of each group. Meanwhile, organized by junior leaders, the participants carried out the group interaction and information exchange, etc. For example, in the research about tourism, each group introduced the characteristics of the tourism in their study country and then selected the most desirable country for traveling.
The first 4-H meeting was a brief introduction of 4-H and the relevant knowledge of the activities, as well as group arrangements. The second meeting was on general information of the study countries. The third meeting was on currency and economy. The fourth meeting was on group interaction and international trade. The fifth meeting was on political systems and tourism. The sixth meeting was on group interaction and selecting the most desirable country for traveling. The seventh and eighth meetings were on culture and people. The ninth meeting was the preparation for final presentations. The junior leaders gave instructions on how to complete the passport, how to give public presentations, what the evaluations would be like, etc. The tenth meeting was the final presentations. Each group presented their “passport” of the study country and had it evaluated by the judges. The judges selected the group with best performance.

In the final stage of the project, the teachers of Luhang high school were invited to evaluate the projects as judges and select the best ones. The participants were required to display and explain their completed projects. The outstanding projects were displayed in the school hall. All of these stimulated the enthusiasm of participating in the projects and promoted interest in learning English, as well as exercised the high school students’ capacities.

Sanda University has received significant results in the expanded course activities carried out in Luhang high school. In the survey conducted after the project, when asked about the greatest gain in participating, more than half of the 40 students indicated that their knowledge had been expanded; nearly one third indicated that their teamwork spirit had been advanced. Six students indicated that their English competence had been significantly improved. When answering the question “Will you participate in other 4-H activities and expanding courses if you are offered the chance”, the vast majority of the students was willing to participate, and hoped that the courses would be longer, with more content and a greater number of students. When asked about the impact of these courses, 90% believed that there was good impact which mainly was their increasing interest in learning and using English. Additionally, 10% of the students indicated that their academic performance may be
affected since their study time had been occupied. The English teachers of the school perceived that the students had greater interest in learning, and enthusiasm and initiative, as well. The students actively asked questions about English language and culture, and looked forward to similar expanded course activities in the future.

4. Implications

According to the feedback provided by Luhang teachers and students, students’ interest in learning, hands-on ability and English knowledge have been greatly improved, which meets the requirements of the second cycle curriculum reform on conducting expanded courses. The practice is also an outstanding example of combining social resources and secondary education together. 4-H has enhanced students’ potential by providing them with experiential learning opportunities as well as making up for some of the shortcomings of the classroom teaching. Taking full advantage of 4-H’s experience in youth development, we can help high schools to develop their courses, launch programs related to the expanded courses, and strengthen teachers training as they cooperate with educators outside of their schools.

In order for other schools and educators, who endeavor to conduct similar courses, to benefit from 4-H experiential leaning, they need to be alert to several key factors.

First, the context needs to be taken into consideration when implementing experiential learning expanded courses. To achieve the desired effects, the course should be adjusted when the context varies. In the case of Luhang, the large classroom and students’ characteristics and interests were taken into account as the project was in the planning stage.

Second, the implementation of the expanded course should be flexible. That is, teachers should adjust the content and process in a timely manner as the specific activities (subjects) and students’ characteristics require. The teacher-centered teaching model should be transformed to a model that uses experiential learning by strengthening the students’ autonomy in learning and allowing sufficient time for student discussion and reflection.
The implementation of expanded courses requires innovative teaching methods. Instead of following the strict routines of regular classes, which are more teacher-centered, flexibility and instructions that allow for diverse learning activities should be incorporated into the teaching process. Finally, to effectively integrate 4-H into expanded courses and take full advantage of experiential learning model, we should carefully combine summative assessment and developmental evaluation with the instructional evaluation conducted.
References


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Appendix 1. Part of activity guide

Passport to the World

A country study guide

Welcome to ‘Passport to the world’ program!
This handbook is designed for you. Through this handbook, you will be engaged into an adventure of a particular country. As you could noticed, there are five groups here in this class and each one of you are representing a country including China, United States of America, Canada, the Great Britain and Australia.

The country you stand for is your ‘study’ country, which means you will be studying this country in the rest of the semester. But don’t worry, you will get plenty of opportunities to communicate will other groups for there is no better way to learn more about your own culture than sharing and comparing it with others. Moreover, ‘diplomatic missions’ between countries are also interesting and something we cannot afford to neglect.

So now, please follow the instructions here and get into the program as soon as possible:

1. Select a group leader! (You could either vote or appoint one, but once the leader is selected, he or she will be a permanent president of the group throughout the semester.)

2. Fill in the tables on page 2. Put all the personal information on it.

3. Select four group members as ‘diplomats’ of this lesson and you are good to go!
The Study Country is _____________

Group members:

Leader

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Other members

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Now, please remember:

The leader is responsible for the maintenance and fulfillment of this handbook, keep it carefully!

All group members should unconditionally obey all the reasonable order given by the leader. You select the one and by listening to him or her, you are showing respect to your own decisions.
Geography

The study country is ____.

Here is the outline map of it; you could put as much information as possible on it to make looks perfect and informative.

Facts of its geographical information:

How many proveniences or states does this country have?

Where is its capitol?

Which continent is this country in?
Please name five neighboring countries:

_________________________________

The type of the government

1) the country’s flag

Draw and color, or photocopy, and cut out and paste the country’s flag here.

What does the colors and symbols mean?

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

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2) Describe the type of the government

If available, give the name and the title of the current head of government

___________________________________________________________
___________________________________________________________
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___________________________________________________________
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___________________________________________________________

When was the country established?

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Official country name, if different from common name:

___________________________________________________________

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Appendix 2.

Questionnaire

1. What is your greatest gain in participating in the project “Passport to the world”?  
2. What are the impacts of participating in the project on your study? Please briefly explain.  
3. Will you participate in other 4-H activities if you have the chance?  
4. Is there anything about the project needs improving? Please briefly explain.  

Thank you for your cooperation!