

Research on Innovative Ways of Integrating Aesthetic Education with Ideological and Political Education in the New Era

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Abstract: Aesthetic education and ideological and political education undertake the educational responsibilities of educating people with beauty and cultivating people with morals, respectively. The innovation of aesthetic education and the reform of ideological and political education have common educational goals and target students. Integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education can promote the overall healthy development of students, which has both historical and practical significance. In this paper, the importance and characteristics of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education in colleges and universities are analyzed from multiple dimensions, and four feasible ways of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education are proposed. The latter draws on extracurricular activities, emotional touch, a pleasant aesthetic atmosphere, and educational synergy to improve students' aesthetic literacy and cultivate correct ideological and political concepts among students. A survey of 1,047 students showed that the understanding and acceptance of ideological and political education were strengthened and improved after implementing these innovative integration ways. Taken together, the exploration and practice of these integration ways contribute to expanding the effect of ideological and political education in the new era and constitute important parts of the reform of college and university education in the new journey.

Keywords: Aesthetic education; Ideological and political education; Integration ways; Practice and effect

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1. Introduction

In colleges and universities, ideological and political education is an important cornerstone for guiding students in establishing correct views of history, nationality, and culture, cultivating noble sentiments and beautiful souls, enhancing students' cultural confidence, and serving the needs of high-quality societal development. Now, we are in times of unprecedented changes, filled with complex and harsh national and international situations that are constantly undergoing profound transformations. The risks and challenges are unpredictable, and the urgency of strengthening ideological and political education for college and university students is extremely pressing. However, there is a tendency for current ideological and political education in colleges and universities to overemphasize the inculcation of ideological concepts and moral norms but neglect the mental development and cognitive level of students ^[1,2]. Hence, it is difficult for

students to acquire direct guidance for their mental problems, resulting in the loss of interest in ideological and political education with arising resistance against indoctrination. The disadvantage of the traditional way of conducting ideological and political education in colleges and universities is becoming more evident. Creating innovative ways for ideological and political education to be carried out in the new era is a concern that warrants comprehensive and extensive investigations.

The idea of aesthetic education has long existed as an essential element in shaping individuals. Aesthetic education aids in the integral development of students' emotions and cognition and allows students to better understand themselves and live creatively and naturally. In China, aesthetic education was first proposed as a content of modern education by Cai Yuanpei who promoted aesthetic education in parallel with physical, intellectual, ethical, and worldview education^[3]. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the main policy of education was to "enable the educated to thrive through moral, intellectual, and physical education and become educated workers with socialist awareness." On October 15, 2020, China's central authorities issued a set of guidelines on strengthening and improving aesthetic education in schools in the new era. The guideline aims at encouraging schools to integrate aesthetic education into the cultivation of students at each grade and sets the goal of establishing a diversified, modern, and high-quality system of aesthetic education by 2035.

Both aesthetic education and ideological and political education play key roles in the healthy development of students. The goal of aesthetic education is to develop an aesthetic sense of beauty and an ability to perceive, experience, create, and evaluate aesthetic qualities^[4]. This is highly consistent with the essence of ideological and political education, which aims at helping students maintain the correct worldview, outlook on life, and values, as well as enhance their sense of responsibility and mission. In addition, the various types of aesthetic activities, such as drawing, visiting museums, reading poetry, and playing musical instruments, could be potential ways of conducting ideological and political education to help students enhance morality, cultivate good ethics, and strengthen cultural confidence. Based on the current social background and the needs of the times, we analyzed the importance and characteristics of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education for college and university students in the new era and proposed four practical ways to ensure a natural and effective integration. Moreover, all four ways were put into practice in this study, and the response of students to these innovative integration ways was investigated and summarized, providing a sound reference for future studies.

2. Importance and characteristics of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education

Ideological and political education plays an essential role in individual growth and comprehensive development. To understand the importance of ideological and political education, one can ask himself or herself the following questions: Are we willing to send our children to be educated by our students who become teachers in the future? Could they offer noble sentiments and good values to our children? Are we willing to be treated by our students who will become doctors in the future? Could they obey and uphold medical ethics and professional norms? Are we willing to buy products from our students who will become engineers in the future? Will they be honest and responsible to consumers? These questions are undeniably related to the worldview, outlook on life, values, and sense of responsibility that ideological and political education intend to communicate.

In the new era, ideological and political education for college and university students is faced with many unexpected challenges. As natives of the digital age born after 2000, these students are deeply influenced by the Internet in all aspects of their lives, including their studies. Although the internet has made life convenient, it contains various ideologies that can interfere with the shaping of correct worldviews, outlook on life, and values and lead to a dramatic shift in students' understanding and

acceptance of ideological and political education, which poses considerable challenges to such education. For example, materialism and celebrity obsession may cause depression among students who take celebrities and possessions as touchstones. However, the current form and method of ideological and political education lack diversity, with a tendency toward indoctrination and cramming, making it difficult to attract students and weakening the permeability and permanence of ideological and political education.

Aesthetic education is an important carrier for establishing morality and cultivating students. It is an education that can enhance aesthetic literacy, cultivate sentiments, nourish the soul, and stimulate creativity. Central authorities in China have stressed the need to comprehensively strengthen and improve aesthetic education in schools, educate people about beauty and culture, as well as improve students' aesthetic and humanistic qualities on various occasions. In the context of aesthetic education, creating an open, inclusive, and innovative environment for ideological and political education can help students better understand national and global conditions, encourage students to explore truth, and enable them to view themselves as equals of any other in the world.

2.1. Aesthetic education can enrich the forms of ideological and political education to help students absorb the correct values

Aesthetic education occurs in many different forms, such as painting, handcrafting, calligraphy, and sketches. The integration of aesthetic education with ideological and political education can engage students and turn static learning into a dynamic one, enabling students to understand and construct knowledge more actively. As their learning experience diversifies, ideological and political education can be better understood and accepted. An engaging environment conferred by aesthetic education would help students realize the spirit of solidarity and hard work, learn to respect and cooperate with each other, and recognize the true meaning of beauty and kindness; these are the listed content embedded in the core socialist values (equality, fairness, honesty, the rule of law, and so on).

2.2. Aesthetic education is conducive to improving the effectiveness of ideological and political education

There are various teaching methods in aesthetic education, including classroom teaching, practical teaching, and emotional experiences. It can do away with indoctrination and teaching-based education, stimulate students' subjective initiative, and subtly guide students' values in a comprehensive, all-process, and all-round manner. Meanwhile, aesthetic education has the potential to evoke students' emotional resonance. Through language expression, behavior, and emotional communication, the emotional touch within students can be aroused, increasing their likelihood to understand and accept the content of ideological and political education. When students resonate emotionally with the content of ideological and political education, they tend to internalize and remember it well as well as retain their identification and support for it over time. In addition, their emotional resonance can promote their mental development, enhance their self-awareness and self-value, as well as improve their humanistic literacy and sense of social responsibility. The integration of various types of aesthetic education with ideological and political education renders the impact of ideological and political education on students more persistent and profound.

3. Practical ways of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education in the new era

In essence, both aesthetic education and ideological and political education in the new era prioritize cultivating morality and fostering virtue. College and university students can be influenced by both aesthetic education and ideological and political education through colorful campus life and activities.

Ideological and political education and aesthetic education share a natural foundation for mutual integration and promotion.

3.1. Using extracurricular activities to ensure that ideological and political education has a long-lasting effect

Apart from conducting ideological and political education in classroom teaching, extracurricular activities play a significant role in the process of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education. By conducting various extracurricular activities such as painting, calligraphy, sketches, handcrafting, and volunteer teaching, patriotism and the spirit of model workers, hard work, and craftsmanship can be better communicated to students. For example, making souvenirs and handicrafts from used paper in a relaxed and cooperative manner would avail students to experience the spirit of dedication and professional ethics. Involving students in activities such as plays, singing and dancing, and poetry recitations can expose them to the aesthetic ideas and emotions the artists convey and render them more patient and patriotic. Arranging students for volunteer work as teachers to teach children in rural areas whose parents have left home to search for work in the city would allow students to enhance their skills and qualities in practical fields and understand more about the national reality and thirst for knowledge among children in less developed regions. The effect of ideological and political education becomes more real-time, subtle, and long-lasting with the integration of aesthetic education and ideological and political education in the form of extracurricular activities, which is far more engaging than the traditional way of ideological and political education, which focuses on cramming the mind with information.

3.2. Creating emotional experiences to enrich the integration of aesthetic education with ideological and political education

Aesthetic education intends to create a harmonious relationship between reason and emotions, which cultivates both logical reasoning and habits of aesthetic appreciation in students^[5]. Visiting medical museums and watching films can enhance students' visual experiences, increase their aesthetic awareness, and appeal to their emotions. For example, by watching a film about the construction of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, the world's longest sea crossing, students may come to appreciate the endeavors and devotions of designers, engineers, and workers; feel the creativity, resolve, and perseverance of the Chinese people; and strengthen their belief that China is a country that performs miracles through hard work. Visiting anatomy museums in medical schools is conducive to the cultivation of noble values of medicine and the conviction of putting life above everything else. On Qingming Festival (Tomb Sweeping Day), offering flowers and reciting thanksgiving poems show students' respect and gratitude for the body and increase their awareness of body donation. By visiting museums of Chinese revolutionary history, students can deepen their understanding that the era of peace is forged by the revolutionary martyrs who bravely laid down their lives to establish, defend, and develop the country and it is important to carry forward the revolutionary traditions and heritage by gaining a better understanding of the revolution history. The emotional touch formed at the bottom of their hearts would be drawn on for inspiration and to forge patriotism.

3.3. Creating an aesthetic atmosphere to facilitate the mental development of students

In addition to satisfying students' basic needs for living, colleges and universities ought to create an aesthetic atmosphere that actively takes into account students' personalities and mental development. Since most ancient Chinese academies possessed pleasant ecological and humanistic environments that were consistent with Confucian humanism, aesthetic education was imparted to students at all times and in all places^[6]. Aesthetic education can engage students emotionally and intellectually through the harmonious

arrangement of colors, light, and shadows^[5]. In order to create a good learning and living environment for contemporary college and university students, the layout, equipment, and facilities at these institutions should conform to the laws of students' physical and mental growth and the spiritual elements of aesthetic education.

For example, green plants, celebrity calligraphy and paintings, textured rest facilities, and fresh colors such as light green, sky blue, and light pink would create a relaxed and comfortable environment for students. A sense of freedom in studying, exercising, reading, relaxing, and resting can help students internalize the core elements of psychological guidance, mental enlightenment, and employment instruction into their hearts as well as achieve the synchronization of students' physical and mental development.

3.4. Forming an educational synergy to enhance the overall quality of students

Student counselors are the frontline workers for ideological and political education in colleges and universities, and it is undeniable that their work should revolve around students. However, there is currently a mistaken belief that any work related to students should involve counselors. This increases the burden on counselors, and they unconsciously take on a lot of additional work outside their core duties. Students have better opportunities for growth and development if they are surrounded by people who believe in them and support them. All human resources on campus, including academic tutors, administrative personnel, and peers, should make an effort in this area. In specific, tutors can guide students to think from different perspectives in their everyday learning and life, with a focus on cultivating students' innovative thinking and independent thinking skills. The administrative office should be set up in students' dormitories to shorten the distance between counselors and students and encourage students to seek psychological guidance, employment direction, and solutions to various issues related to their interests. Outstanding senior students can serve as mentors and role models to students in the lower grade, as peer mentorship is known to provide a stable and upward educational environment for both aesthetic education and ideological and political education. In addition, new media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat could also be used to provide ideological guidance to students and respond to students whenever doubts are raised. These platforms make it easier for teachers, administrative personnel, and students to communicate and interact with one another more effectively and efficiently. The coordination of all these resources allows the comprehensive development of students in academic aspects, aesthetic literacies, and ideological and political thinking.

4. Survey of students' acceptance of the integration ways

In this study, we analyzed the effect of innovative ways of integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education through a survey that included 1,217 college students born after 2000, with 1,047 valid questionnaires.

4.1. Engagement in extracurricular activities helps improve ideological and political education

According to the survey, 815 students (77.84%) believed that aesthetic activities such as painting and handicrafts had a substantial positive influence on improving their ideological cognition, 167 students (15.95%) thought that the effect was average, and 65 students (6.21%) believed that the effect was insignificant; 937 students (89.49%) felt that aesthetic activities such as stage plays, recitations, singing, and dancing have greatly enriched the forms of ideological and political education. In response to the question "Do you think that aesthetic activities can cultivate sentiments and alleviate psychological pressure?", 961 students believed that they could, while the remaining 86 students thought they could not, accounting for 91.79% and 8.21%, respectively. All students participating in making handicrafts from waste paper understood the importance of craftsmanship better and believed that intangible cultural heritages such

as paper cutting and watercolor painting should be protected, inherited, and developed in contemporary China. The students working as volunteer teachers in rural areas saw the real China in the fields and gained a better understanding of rural life and education.

These results demonstrated that breaking the traditional didactic form of ideological and political education and integrating aesthetic education with ideological and political education can enhance students' understanding of national reality, cultivate their sentiments, and alleviate their psychological pressure.

4.2. Appropriate emotional experiences preserve the effect of ideological and political education

According to the survey, 785 students (74.98%) believed that visiting medical museums, anatomy museums, and life museums had a significant effect on promoting their understanding and acceptance of ideological and political education in the new era; they were deeply touched by the invaluable contribution of body donation, which enables them to study the complexity of the human body in a way that is not possible by any other means and thus strengthens their determination to study harder to alleviate human suffering in the future. By watching a film about the construction of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, the students realized that industrialization has sped up the economic development and urbanization in China, promoted the progress of science and technology, and improved the livelihood of people. This greatly enhanced their confidence in the strength of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. All students reported that visiting museums of Chinese revolutionary history led them to ponder on what they could do under those historical circumstances, and they were determined to continue working hard and serve the motherland.

These results demonstrated that emotional touch can be elicited in students through visual communication and immersive experiences and the effect of emotional resonance is not transient, but rather lingering, which can preserve the effect of ideological and political education.

4.3. A pleasant aesthetic atmosphere effectively promotes the personal growth of students

The survey showed that 976 students (93.22%) believed that adding green plants, celebrity calligraphy and paintings, textured rest facilities, and color designs into living spaces, such as school gyms, supermarkets, leisure and entertainment venues, libraries, study rooms, laundry rooms, and shower rooms, can help alleviate their mental burden and make them feel calm, comfortable, and more willing to internalize the elements of ideological and political education; 930 students (88.83%) believed that the relationship between aesthetic education and ideological and political education is complementary in that they can integrate with and promote each other in a comfortable aesthetic atmosphere.

These results demonstrated that by creating an aesthetic atmosphere, the living and learning environment will be pleasant, thus effectively promoting the physical and mental development of students and enabling them to more willingly accept the influence of ideological and political education.

4.4. The educational synergy of human resources on campus greatly strengthens the route of ideological and political education

In addition to the aesthetic atmosphere, the surrounding environment constituting the available human resources on campus, including teachers and administrative personnel, is also crucial for mental growth and forming correct worldviews.

The survey showed that 924 students (88.25%) believed that teachers of different subjects and peer mentors can guide them to think things from different perspectives and cultivate their innovative thinking and independent thinking skills; 850 students (81.18%) felt that setting up a counselor's office in the dormitory have broken the barrier between teachers and students, making it easier for them to seek psychological guidance, employment instruction, and emotional relief; 827 students (78.99%) believed that new media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat had a beneficial effect on the exchange of ideas and

communication of emotions; 901 students (86.06%) believed that outstanding senior students can help them understand their school life more readily and alleviate their negative emotions at the point of care.

These results demonstrated that by coordinating the efforts of all human resources on campus and forming an educational synergy, students can develop their qualities in an all-round manner.

5. Conclusion

Both aesthetic education and ideological and political education play key roles in students' overall development. Ideological and political education aims at helping students form correct worldviews, and outlooks on life and values, while aesthetic education focuses on helping students nurture their aesthetic literacy, emotion, and personality. Based on the same educational goals and target students, the two can integrate with and complement each other both in theory and practice. In fact, several education policies in China have already assumed the effort of strengthening and improving aesthetic education as an important task in the new era and proposed to integrate aesthetic education into the cultivation of students at each grade. In order for the integration to happen, innovative ways are required, along with the involvement of teachers and administrative personnel, feedback from students, and multiple rounds of practice and improvement.

By analyzing 1,047 questionnaires, we summarized the specific implementation of four integration ways and found that through extracurricular activities, experiencing emotional touch, creating a pleasant aesthetic atmosphere, and forming an educational synergy with all human resources on campus, the ideological and political education for contemporary college students in the new era can be better enhanced. The effective applications of these four ways enable students to improve their aesthetic, ideological, and comprehensive qualities in a “stress-free” environment. In other words, the effect of ideological and political education can be amplified and extended by the integration of aesthetic education.

In conclusion, we use the principles and forms of aesthetic education to supplement ideological and political education in colleges and universities, endowing ideological and political education with a sense of liveliness, enhancing the attractiveness of ideological and political education, and opening up a new channel for ideological and political education.

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Disclosure statement

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