

# *On the Concept of Content of General Secondary Education*

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The formation of the modern concept of the content of the general secondary education requires a critical comprehension of the principled fundamentals of selection of the education content taking into consideration the trends of the social development in our country, the achievements of the pedagogical science, the experience of the Soviet and world school and real conditions of education. Such a work presupposes the integration of the ideas and efforts of various research groups aimed at the search of the common standpoints as the basis of a unified concept. It is also essential that the process of creating a new concept cannot be separated from the process of its implementation in the course of which the initial standpoints are corrected and specified. Therefore the concept as a final document should arise in the organic fusion of the theoretical researches and practical activities for the implementation of the results.

From the methodological standpoints the formation of the concept of the content is recommended to be effected by the successive defining of a certain initial project through the organization of its critical discussion, theoretical and experimental elaboration and subsequent estimation of the approaches suggested therein, etc. In this case the aim of the present project consists in the creation of the "field of action" for this activity.

## **I. Introduction**

The principled feature of the current period of development of the soviet school is the substantial change of the function of the general secondary education. The processes of democratization and humanization of school (the single social and cultural institution of education common to all the citizens of the country) single out the general educational and general cultural aspects of the content of education. The rise and development of school as the basic link of the system of continuous education is impossible without ensuring the supporting nature of education at school, which imposes its limitations on the content of education. The processes of democratization and humanization taking place in Soviet society cause the adequate change of the aims of the general secondary education, i.e. the development of the pupil's personality becomes the main priority of school. At last, the school practice accumulated a great number of shortcomings to be removed; on the other hand, the pedagogical science and practice disclosed considerable reserves for enhancing the quality of education.



When investigating this problem, we proceed from the conception of the general secondary education as the basic link of the system of continuous education called upon to ensure the allround development and valuable ethical orientation of the personality, the assimilation of the spiritual richness of the national, home and world culture by this personality, the active participation in the main spheres of the working and social activities, the shaping of the readiness and ability to the further education and selfeducation. The content of education is a means for the implementation of the aims of education indicated in the social order of school. In this case the content of the general secondary education is to give each school graduate the opportunity to obtain:

- a) the knowledge of the man, nature and society ensuring the formation of the scientific picture of the world as the basis of the world outlook and orientation in selection of the sphere of the future practical activity;
- b) the experience of the communicative, mental, emotional, physical and labour activities ensuring the formation of the basic intellectual, work, organizational and hygienic skills and habits which are necessary in the everyday life, for the participation in the social production, continuation of education and selfeducation;
- c) the experience of the creative activity giving the opportunity for the development of the individual abilities of the personality and ensuring its preparation for life under conditions of the socioeconomic and scientific and technical progress;
- d) the experience of the social and personal relations preparing the youth for the active participation in the life of our country, starting a family and planning the personal life on the basis of the ideals, ethical and aesthetical valuables of the modern society (I.Ya.Lerner).

From the practical point of view, the content of education has several levels of presentation. It is rendered concrete in succession and detailed in the hierarchical system of the standard documents guiding the activities of school and addressed both to the wide public (the employers, institutions of the postschool education, parents) and to the immediate participants and organizers of the study process (the bodies of public education, framers of the study plans and programmes, authors of the training aids, teachers, pupils).

At the level of *the study plan* the content of education can be presented as a list of fields and types of activities and approximate distribution of the planned pupil workload between them.

At the level of *the flexible study programmes* for each of the chosen fields of knowledge or types of activity, the content of education can be



presented as a nomenclature of the problems to be studied, structurized in accordance with the specificity of the given subject field and requirements for the standards of their teaching and assimilation assigned to the time of finishing a certain stage of teaching.

At the level of *the working study programmes* implementing the specific methodological system of teaching, the content of education can be assigned a sequence of the problems to be studied in their logical organization and planned results of their study.

At last, the content of education can be presented more specifically and in detail at the level of *the textbooks and aids in methods*.

## **II. Subject fields of knowledge and activity**

The general educational orientation of school imposes on the selection of the content of the general secondary education a condition of the completeness of its basic elements. Relative to the composition of the subject fields and activity this condition requires the inclusion of the basic fields of the assimilated universal culture to the content of education, i.e. the principle of adequacy of the general education. A definite structuring of the content of education follows from this, meeting the necessity of cognition of the basic components of the world surrounding the man (as a spiritual and biological being), the nature and society, which gives rise to the adequate structure of the subject fields.

Proceeding from the analysis of the aims of the general secondary education with consideration for the principle of adequacy of the general education, experience and traditions of the world and home school, we single out the following subject fields of knowledge: "Philology", "Art", "Social science", "Mathematics", "Natural science", "Manual and physical training".

The subject field "Philology" comprises the content of education ensuring the mastery of the native language, the Russian language as the language of the international communication of the peoples of our country and a foreign language by the pupils. The mastery of the languages is impossible apart from the study of literature, therefore literature is the most essential component part of the subject field under consideration.

The adequate content of education can be presented in the form of various sets of the academic subjects: thus, at the primary school, prospecting is the integration of all or some part of the indicated subjects; at the principal school known are the versions of both separate and integrated study of the language and literature; at the upper stage of school the priority is usually given to the literature education.



The subject field "Art" includes the content of education connected with the shaping of the artistic culture of the pupils. Related here are, first of all, literature as the object of the artistic comprehension of the world, music and fine arts.

Promising at the primary school is a partial integration of the content of the aesthetic education together with the physical training (rhythmics, dancing) and manual training (artistic work). At the principal school the systematic study of separate subjects can be completed by the subject of the general aesthetic type. At the upper stage of school the main potential of the aesthetic education is implemented through the study of literature and optional artistic activity of the pupils.

The subject field "Social science" incorporates the study of the material of the sociopolitical subjects, i.e. history, economic and social geography, fundamentals of ethics and law, elements of economy, philosophy, politics, sociology and psychology.

At the primary school it is advisable to unite the content of the subject field with the material of the natural science within the limits of the integrated subject of the "Surrounding world" type. Promising at the principal and upper stages of school is the integration of the sociopolitical subjects on the basis of the cultural and historical approach to the construction of the course. The subject structure at the upper stage essentially depends on the method of differentiation of teaching adopted by school: under conditions of the school specialization oriented towards the sociopolitical subjects and types of activity, advisable is the systematic study of the separate courses.

The subject field "Mathematics" includes the complex of the traditional school mathematical subjects (arithmetic, algebra, geometry, elementary functions and elements of mathematical analysis) and elements of the information science. It is assumed that the mastery of the elements of the information science by the pupils within the limits of the subject field being discussed will be accompanied by the intensive use of the information technology when studying other subjects.

At the primary school it is advisable to conduct teaching under conditions of one integrated subject "Mathematics". Promising is also the integration of the content of the mathematical education with the content of the cycles "Philology", "Social science" and "Natural science". The integrated teaching (as at the Estonian school) and separate arrangement of the subjects of the mathematical cycle is possible at the principal school. It is more advisable here to envisage the obtaining of the fundamentals of the computer competence. The construction of the subjects at the upper stage depends, to a great extent, on the method of differentiation of teaching adopted by school: under conditions of the school specialization towards the mathematical subjects, recommended should be the systematic study of the separate mathematical courses; in other cases advisable is the unified integrated course of mathematics.



The subject field "Natural science" comprises the content of the natural science subjects, i.e. physical geography, physics, astronomy, chemistry and biology. The rich polytechnical potential of the natural science enables connecting its study with the initial acquaintance with the world of technology. In the study of the natural science, the ecological approach should take a noticeable place, disclosing the essence of the global ecological problems of the mankind and ways of their solution, fostering the love for the nature, desire for its protection.

At the primary school it is expedient to unite the content of the subject field with the material of the social science within the limits of the integrated subject of the "Surrounding world" type. At the beginning of the principal stage, advisable also is the integrated study of the natural science that can shift later on to the traditional systematic study of the separate subjects. The construction of the subjects at the upper stage depends, to a great extent, on the method of differentiation of teaching adopted by school: under conditions of the school specialization towards the natural science subjects advisable is the systematic study of the separate courses; in other cases a unified integrated course of the natural science is possible.

The subject field "Manual and physical training" includes the content of the manual training, vocational orientation and physical training.

It is recommended to conduct the manual training at all stages of teaching. Promising at the primary school is the partial integration of the subject with the material of art. At the principal school it is more advisable to study the manual training as a separate subject including the elements of drawing. It is quite reasonable here to concentrate the main potential of the work for the vocational orientation. At the specialised upper stage of school it is recommended to orient the manual training to the connection with the specialization type.

The physical training as an academic subject aimed at the health improvement should be also present in each parallel of school. At the upper stage it is recommended to include into its content the elements of the initial military training.

Thus, the content of education can be structured as a unity of the subject fields corresponding to the basic components of the universal culture being assimilated and represented at each of the stages of teaching. The tendency of humanization of education is manifested, first of all, in the appropriate constituting and valuable filling of the content of the humanitarian subject fields. The interpretation of the humanitarization of education, however, can be noticeably extended by including the personality's basis to the process of studying the basic elements of culture. In this case the natural science, for example, is studied not only as a complex of the objective knowledge of the nature but also in the natural connection of the nature with the man as a cognitive subject. Such an approach creates the prerequisite for saturating the traditional content



with the categories of full value, places the pupil into the position of the man who creatively participates in the discovery and cognition of the world but not as a passive observer.

It is quite natural that the diverse conditions under which school is staying impose their own requirements to the forms of presentation of the content of education. This gives rise to the diversity of the possible versions of the subject structure of education depending on the national, regional and local conditions. In this case the set of the subject fields remains invariant, whereas their filling with the specific subjects can appreciably differ from one Republic to another one and even from one school to another one. In this sense the subject structure of the content of education is derivative with respect to the structure of the subject fields.

When defining the subject structure, it is also necessary to take into account its conditionality by the stages of the pupils' development of age, which, in particular, means that at each stage of teaching the distribution of the academic subjects, the content of the study material, the approaches to its presentation should fully comply with the very nature of the personality, the maturing of the essential forces being laid in each child.

### **III. Components of education content**

The conditions of the active continuous education enable an appreciable revision of the general secondary education content to be made, relieving it from the rather special problems that are secondary from the standpoints of the general culture; removal of the functions of the special or vocational training unusual for it and that are more organically ensured in the adequately oriented systems of education. This circumstance is of great importance in terms of normalization of the pupils' workload. It is more important, however, that the general cultural orientation of the general secondary education is realized within the limits of this approach and the significant fundamental component is singled out in it. This sharply strengthens the adaptive capabilities of the school graduates in the process of their formation in the world of the modern labour requiring the high level of the general education and development of the man.

A certain differentiation of the education content follows from the principle of the general cultural orientation of the general education depending on the degree of generality of the educational direction of the general education content for the schools of our country. The invariant component of the general secondary education content is called upon to ensure the unity of the cultural development of the young generation of our country under conditions of the school diversity, the possibility of supporting on the general educational preparation of the schoolchildren in the vocational training, life and work and, as a consequence, the



continuity of school and stages of the continuous education system being relied on it. The variative component of the general secondary education content is in agreement with the aims of considering the national, regional and local sociocultural peculiar features and traditions, personal interests and aptitudes of the children.

The suggested division of the education content serves as one of the bases of the differentiation of the general secondary education: the flexible change of the content at the various types of schools, the individual or group enlargement and development of the education content can be effected due to the variative component.

The division of the composition of the education content in the State basic study plan into the UnionRepublican, Republican and school components is a practical realization of the indicated approach.

The UnionRepublican component of the education content determines the invariant basic on which is effected the construction of the diverse models of the schools and separate academic subjects with consideration for the national and local conditions and traditions, needs of the pupils and their parents, independent creative and innovatory pedagogical initiatives. The separation of the UnionRepublican component is called upon to ensure the equivalence of education at the various schools of the country, its correlation with the international standards of the secondary education, the possibility of relying on the general educational preparation of the schoolchildren in the vocational training, life and work, the continuity in transition from the basic to the subsequent stages of the continuous education system.

The Republican component comprises the education content, fundamentally connected with the national, regional and local factors. The separation of the Republican component enables reflecting in the education content the specific conditions, peculiar features and traditions of the Republic, the needs of the region, linking the study of the cultural heritage common to all mankind with the national factor, placing the entire process of teaching at school on the sound foundation of the national culture.

The school component of the education content is intended for the further adaptation of the content to the conditions of the instructional and educational process under conditions of the specific educational establishment. Its filling primarily depends on the peculiarities of the enrolment of the pupils, their educational requirements and interests, on the personnel and physical plant of the school; the peculiarities of the social infrastructure and labour market turned out in this region, etc.

The suggested approach enables working out the variative models of the Republican study plans and working study plans of the specific schools on the basis of the State basic study plan. The flexible mechanism and democratic procedure of working out of the study plans promotes the organic combination of the unity of the nationwide goals and require-



ments to the educational level and diversity of the ways of their realization on the basis of the maximum consideration of the national and local peculiarities in the content and nature of education.

The division of the general secondary education content into the invariant and variative components is essential only in the process of selection of the content as a means of coordinating this selection between the Republics and ensuring the equivalence of education in the country. In the real educational process these components of the education content are organically interconnected. It means that such a division is not advisable at the lower stages of the hierarchy of documents specifying the education content, i.e. in the working study plans and programmes of schools, textbooks and teaching aids.

#### **IV. Forms of assigning education content**

The basic nature of the school relative to the continuous education system becomes apparent that the general secondary education should be a real support of the subsequent forms of the vocational and general cultural preparation. It is possible only on condition of the guaranteed reaching by each graduate of the general secondary education system of a preset basic level of the general educational preparation (State standard of education), which ensures the equivalence of education obtained at the various types of schools. It should be underlined that it is the assignment of the basic level in the State standard documents (National Curriculum in Great Britain, National Standards in the USA, etc.) that makes it possible to construct the various models of the school by means of dialectical settlement of the contradiction between the requirements of the uniformity and diversity of the school.

It follows from these considerations that the method (traditional till now) of the presentation of the education content in the programmes by enumerating the nomenclature of the problems to be studied should be changed: essential is not what was studied but what was actually assimilated by the pupil. Thus, the basic level cannot be presented as "a sum of the knowledge" to be studied at school. The assignment of the education content through the level description of the general educational preparation of the schoolchildren is a progressive nationwide trend.

The basic level is called upon to define and preset the lower boundary of the result of the valuable and highquality school education. The possibility of confining by this level, when studying the unfavourable or difficult subjects, ensuring the sufficient limits of their assimilation, is simultaneously an important factor for eliminating the pupil's overburdening. On the other hand, only after relieving the pupil from a burden of the total workload beyond his power, we shall be able to direct his efforts to the field of his aptitudes and interests, promoting the child's development, formation of the positive motivation of the study. Thus,



the idea of the State level of the compulsory general educational preparation is dialectically correlated with the striving for the maximum full development of the abilities of the children.

The optimum form of presentation of the basic level is its assignment by means of a clear indication of the samples of activity (including the selfeducation) that are subject to the compulsory assimilation by the children. This form meets the activity approach being developed by the home psychological and pedagogical science. Apart from this, its use creates the prerequisites for the active involvement of the schoolchildren to the conscious selection of the inherent level of assimilation of the education content, which is essential from the standpoints of humanization of the school. However, the immediate direct transition from the general objectives of education to the construction of the system of the activity samples is impossible both because of the incomplete elaboration in the science of the adequate means of description of the activity in a compact type and due to the necessity of the intermediate auxiliary forms of the presentation of the common goals that allow the meaningful discussion. The natural auxiliary form of the presentation of the basic level is its assignment by indicating the State requirements for the compulsory level of the general educational preparation of the schoolchildren.

The nomenclature composition of the general secondary education content is determined on the basis of the analysis of the basic level. Generally speaking, the basic level can be reached with appreciable variations of the nomenclature composition. Therefore the approach to the assignment of the education content by indicating the compulsory State requirements for the basic level enables working out the flexible study programmes.

Thus, it is necessary to assign the education content via the system of the State requirements for the compulsory level of assimilation. However, by its meaning, this level is oriented to all the pupils, whereas the most important aim of the school consists in the maximum development of each schoolboy. Therefore we are interested in the creation of the possibilities for surpassing the basic level of education; with this in view, it is advisable to fix the levels of the advanced preparation. The difference of these levels should be primarily determined by the depth of the mastery of the education content rather than by the additional study of the new sections. On this condition, this difference will play a role of a peculiar potential difference orienting the interested schoolboy and imparting the required impulse to his efforts. Thus, for the effective realization of the educative teaching, the education content cannot be limited by the requirements of the minimum, since the level of education should surpass the level of the minimal standards – the principle of "the scissors" (L.V.Kuznetsova).

The idea of the normative introduction of the compulsory and advanced levels of the general educational preparation, by its conception, orients the teaching at school and at each stage to the final result. However, it



can be applied also to the current teaching process where the summary State requirements give rise to the current requirements for the levels of assimilation of the study material. In this case the prerequisites are created for the differentiation of the current study requirements by the levels of assimilation, which can be an important means of democratization of the teaching process. It is advisable to familiarize the schoolchildren with the compulsory requirements: this will build up the basis for the conscious individual selection of the education surpassing this level, ensure the individually selected trajectory of the more complete development of the pupil in accordance with his abilities and interests.

Thus, the prerequisites are created for the dialectical settlement of the dilemma, since the earliest times, about the rights and duties of the pupil in teaching: the schoolboy should meet the State requirements for the level of the compulsory preparation and has the right (naturally, supported by the possibilities) to advance further. Available is an agreement situation that is psychologically clear to the children and that promotes the voluntary involvement of the schoolboy to the cooperation with the teacher.

The space between the levels of the compulsory and advanced preparation should be filled with a peculiar "ladder" of activity, the voluntary climbing on the latter from the compulsory to the advanced levels is capable of ensuring the pupil with the permanent staying in the zone of the closest development (L.S.Vygotsky), the teaching at the individual level of difficulty within one's powers, which optimizes the educative function of the learning (V.V.Davydov, L.V.Zamkov).

It is suggested to give the general secondary education content by means of the flexible programmes for the subject fields (philology, mathematics, natural science, etc.) and versions of their subject structure. The level differentiation in the programmes (envisaging, in particular, the division of the basic and advanced levels) is assigned by the obvious indication of the desirable aims of teaching ("the pupil can") with the simultaneous fixing of the level of the compulsory preparation ("the pupil must"). The indicated levels to be reached are assigned with respect to the summary results of teaching at the various stages of the school. The State standards of education are reflected in the auxiliary standard documents (programmes, lists of the so called "compulsory results of teaching"), in the systems of the current compulsory and advanced requirements engendered by them and adequate results of teaching (directly connected with the specific methodological systems being realized in the teaching process), in the content of the textbooks and teaching aids.