International Journal of Law, Ethics and Social Sciences

Review

An Analysis of Content Overlap and Progressive Development Between High School Ideological and Political Courses and College Ideological and Political Theory Courses

Aiwa Huang[1,*], Xianan Chen[1] and Honghao Lin[1]

[1] Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, China
* Correspondence: Aiwa Huang, Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, China

Abstract: This review paper examines the relationship between high school ideological and political courses and college ideological and political theory courses, focusing on content overlap and progressive development. The analysis is organized around four guiding questions: which content domains overlap across educational stages, how cognitive and moral complexity advances during the transition, what structural and pedagogical challenges arise from curricular disjunctions, and what future pathways can improve articulation. The paper first provides a historical overview of both curricular levels, tracing their policy origins, institutional roles, and evolving emphases. It then identifies core areas of overlap, including civic values, theoretical foundations, national history, and contemporary policy issues. While these shared domains create continuity, they also risk redundancy if not carefully sequenced. The paper next analyzes progressive development across three dimensions: cognitive complexity, moral reasoning scope, and learning agency. High school courses tend to emphasize concrete knowledge, personal morality, guided learning, and standardized assessment, whereas college courses prioritize abstract theory, systemic analysis, independent inquiry, and critical writing. The transition between these orientations is not automatic; it depends on deliberate curricular articulation. The paper then compares structural and pedagogical challenges, such as misaligned learning outcomes, repetitive content, and discontinuous teaching methods. It argues that effective progression requires clear differentiation of depth, not mere repetition of topics. Finally, the paper explores future perspectives, including standard alignment, teacher collaboration, and student-centered pathways. The conclusion synthesizes the findings and proposes that curriculum designers treat overlap as an opportunity for spiral progression rather than duplication. By mapping both continuity and differentiation, this review contributes to more coherent ideological and political education across secondary and tertiary levels.

Keywords: Curriculum Articulation; Ideological Education; Progressive Learning; Content Overlap; Political Theory

Received: 15 January 2026
Revised: 25 February 2026
Accepted: 12 March 2026
Published: 18 March 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

1.1. Context and Significance

The integration of ideological and political education across secondary and tertiary levels constitutes a critical component of national talent cultivation strategies [1]. As curricular reforms advance, growing scholarly and practical attention has centered on the coherence between high school ideological and political courses and college ideological and political theory courses. A central concern involves the risk of redundant content, which may diminish student engagement and undermine the progressive logic of ideological education. This review responds to practical demands for understanding how these two stages can complement rather than duplicate each other, thereby fostering a coherent and developmentally appropriate educational continuum [2, 3].

1.2. Purpose and Guiding Questions

This review analyzes the content overlap and progressive development between high school ideological and political courses and college ideological and political theory courses [4]. It addresses four guiding questions: which content domains overlap across these educational stages; how cognitive and moral complexity advances as students transition; what structural and pedagogical challenges arise from curricular disjunctions; and what future pathways can improve articulation between secondary and tertiary political education. By examining these dimensions, the review seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding curricular continuity and identifying opportunities for enhanced coordination [5, 6].

1.3. Scope and Structure

This study adopts a qualitative comparative approach, synthesizing curricular documents, pedagogical principles, and developmental theory rather than relying on empirical measurement. The analysis proceeds through several interconnected stages [5]. It begins with a historical overview of the relationship between the two educational levels, followed by a thematic analysis of content overlap and an examination of progressive development. The discussion then compares the distinct challenges facing each stage before outlining future perspectives [7]. This structured progression enables a coherent account of how continuity and advancement operate across the ideological education continuum. The analysis concentrates on curricular content and developmental sequencing; the institutional, governance, and policy conditions of instructional connection are treated separately.

2. Historical Overview

2.1. Evolution of High School Ideological and Political Curriculum

The evolution of high school ideological and political curricula reflects a deliberate shift from fragmented moral instruction toward integrated frameworks that combine values education, legal literacy, economic reasoning, philosophical inquiry, and national history. Early iterations prioritized civic virtues and personal conduct, emphasizing behavioral norms and social responsibility through concrete, example-driven pedagogy [8]. Over successive reforms, these courses became increasingly systematized, acquiring structured knowledge domains while retaining their foundational orientation toward character formation and societal participation [9]. This trajectory reveals a persistent tension between the stage's need for accessible, life-centered content and the disciplinary coherence demanded by cumulative learning. Consequently, the high school curriculum solidified its role as a preparatory stage, cultivating foundational understanding and normative dispositions rather than abstract theoretical mastery, thereby establishing the cognitive and affective groundwork upon which subsequent college-level ideological and political theory courses could build.

2.2. Development of College Ideological and Political Theory Courses

The institutionalization of ideological and political theory courses in higher education marked a decisive shift toward systematic theoretical frameworks. Curricula increasingly integrated historical materialism, political economy, and contemporary policy analysis, moving beyond fragmented moral instruction. This academic orientation prioritized abstract reasoning, critical interpretation, and independent inquiry, distinguishing college coursework from earlier pedagogical modes [4]. Students were expected to engage with foundational texts and evaluate competing theoretical perspectives, fostering analytical depth rather than rote recall. Consequently, the college curriculum established a distinct intellectual culture, one that emphasized conceptual rigor and the application of theory to complex social realities.

2.3. Policy Milestones and Curricular Interfaces

Policy milestones have progressively structured the interface between secondary and tertiary ideological education. National curriculum standards for high school courses

delineate terminal competencies, while college syllabi presuppose foundational knowledge that incoming students ostensibly possess [10, 11]. Articulation initiatives have sought to align these expectations, yet persistent tensions arise between standardized content mandates and the flexible progression that diverse student cohorts require. The high school exit profile emphasizes attitudinal and civic outcomes, whereas college entry assumptions prioritize theoretical depth and analytical capacity. This mismatch generates recurring friction at the curricular interface, where uniform policy instruments confront heterogeneous institutional contexts. Consequently, policy efforts oscillate between centralizing content specifications and permitting adaptive implementation, leaving the articulation mechanism incompletely resolved [12, 13].

3. Core Theme: Content Overlap and Structural Parallels

3.1. Foundational Values and Citizenship Education

The foundational layer of ideological and political education across both stages is anchored in the cultivation of civic values, national identity, and social responsibility, yet the structural parallels in curricular goals mask significant divergences in pedagogical depth and cognitive framing [14]. At the high school level, the transmission of these values is predominantly concrete and affect-centered, emphasizing personal morality, community participation, and patriotic sentiment through exemplary narratives and experiential activities that render abstract civic principles accessible to adolescent learners. Upon entering college, the ideological and political theory courses revisit these same value domains but reframe them through ethical reasoning, political philosophy, and the critical examination of citizenship as a reflective practice [2]. This progression from affective identification to analytical engagement constitutes a deliberate deepening rather than mere repetition, wherein the continuity of core values provides a stable axiological foundation while the shift toward theoretical abstraction and critical inquiry demands a correspondingly higher order of intellectual participation. Consequently, the overlap in foundational content serves as a necessary bridge for curricular coherence, but it simultaneously necessitates clear differentiation in depth, application, and expected learning outcomes to prevent redundancy and to ensure that college-level instruction genuinely advances students beyond the cognitive and moral parameters established in secondary education [6].

3.2. Theoretical Frameworks and Ideological Concepts

The theoretical architecture shared across these curricular stages centers on socialist principles, historical development, and political economy, yet the cognitive operations demanded of students diverge substantially. As detailed in Table 1, the curricular domain of civic and moral values illustrates this divergence: high school instruction emphasizes personal integrity, social responsibility, and patriotic sentiment through concrete examples, whereas college coursework advances ethical reasoning, civic participation, and ideological analysis through theoretical frameworks, yielding an overlap characterized by foundational values with differing depth. Similarly, within theoretical foundations, high school introduces basic concepts of socialist theory and national development, while college examines systematic theoretical lineages, philosophical underpinnings, and historical materialism, producing an overlap of core concepts with advanced abstraction [3]. The domain of national history and contemporary policy exhibits the same pattern, with high school focusing on key historical events and current policy awareness and college emphasizing historiographical interpretation, policy analysis, and global comparisons, resulting in thematic continuity with analytical progression [11]. These qualitative distinctions clarify that overlap does not imply redundancy; rather, shared content domains are progressively reconstituted at higher levels of abstraction and analytical rigor.

Table 1. Qualitative Comparison of Curricular Content Domains

Curricular Domain	High School Emphasis	College Emphasis	Nature of Overlap
Civic and Moral Values	Personal integrity, social responsibility, and patriotic sentiment through concrete examples	Ethical reasoning, civic participation, and ideological analysis through theoretical frameworks	Foundational values with differing depth
Theoretical Foundations	Basic concepts of socialist theory and national development	Systematic theoretical lineages, philosophical underpinnings, and historical materialism	Core concepts with advanced abstraction
National History and Contemporary Policy	Key historical events and current policy awareness	Historiographical interpretation, policy analysis, and global comparisons	Thematic continuity with analytical progression

3.3. Overlap in Historical and Contemporary Topics

The curricula of both educational tiers converge on a set of recurring historical and contemporary themes, including national development trajectories, social transformation, and global engagement. In high school, the treatment of these topics centers on key historical events and the cultivation of awareness regarding current policies. Students are expected to recognize milestones and understand the basic orientation of national strategies [1]. At the college level, the same thematic clusters are revisited but reframed through historiographical interpretation, policy critique, and comparative analysis [1]. Rather than merely recalling events or policy content, college students are required to evaluate competing historical narratives, assess the rationale and limitations of policy choices, and situate domestic developments within a broader global context [3]. This recurrence of themes across levels constitutes a structural foundation for spiral progression. When topics are revisited at higher levels of complexity, students can build on prior factual knowledge and advance toward analytical and evaluative competencies. However, the overlap also risks redundancy if the college treatment does not clearly transcend the high school emphasis on recognition and awareness. The progressive potential therefore depends on deliberate differentiation in cognitive demand and interpretive depth.

4. Core Theme: Progressive Development and Cognitive Sequencing

4.1. From Concrete Knowledge to Abstract Theory

The transition from high school to college ideological and political education necessitates a fundamental cognitive shift, moving students from the acquisition of discrete facts toward the mastery of abstract theoretical frameworks. In high school, instruction typically presents discrete facts, descriptive explanations, and moral examples, whereas college coursework demands abstract modeling, critical synthesis, and theoretical critique. As detailed in Table 2, this progression is structured across three key dimensions. Cognitively, the developmental bridge requires scaffolding that moves learners from description to analysis, enabling them to connect concrete experience with conceptual reasoning. The scope of moral reasoning likewise expands, shifting from a focus on personal conduct, family, and community values toward institutional justice, ideological systems, and global citizenship, bridged by reflective practice that links personal experience to structural understanding [8]. Finally, learning agency transitions from teacher-guided activities and standardized tasks to self-directed reading, seminar discussion, and independent research, supported by a gradual transfer of responsibility [1, 11]. These dimensions collectively illustrate that progressive development depends not merely on increased content difficulty but on deliberate pedagogical scaffolding that connects concrete experience to conceptual reasoning [11].

Table 2. Progression Dimensions Across Educational Stages

Progression Dimension	High School Orientation	College Orientation	Developmental Bridge
Cognitive Complexity	Presents discrete facts, descriptive explanations, and moral examples	Requires abstract modeling, critical synthesis, and theoretical critique	Scaffolding that moves learners from description to analysis, connecting concrete experience with conceptual reasoning
Moral Reasoning Scope	Centers on personal conduct, family, and community values	Expands to institutional justice, ideological systems, and global citizenship	Reflective practice that links personal experience to structural understanding
Learning Agency	Relies on teacher-guided activities and standardized tasks	Expects self-directed reading, seminar discussion, and independent research	Gradual transfer of responsibility from teacher to learner

4.2. From Personal Morality to Systemic Analysis

The progression from personal morality to systemic analysis represents a pivotal cognitive shift within the ideological education continuum. In high school, moral reasoning is predominantly framed around individual character formation, interpersonal ethics, and community social responsibility, emphasizing virtuous conduct and civic duty. College instruction, by contrast, cultivates structural critique and ethical deliberation, guiding learners to interrogate institutional justice, ideological frameworks, and global citizenship [5]. This transition demands that students move beyond personalized moral intuitions toward analytical engagement with the systemic forces shaping social arrangements [3]. The cognitive sequencing thus requires reflective practices that deliberately connect lived experience to broader structural analysis, enabling learners to recognize how individual moral agency operates within and is conditioned by institutional and ideological contexts [7]. Such scaffolding ensures that the cultivation of personal virtue in secondary education serves as a foundational substrate rather than a terminal endpoint, progressively extending toward the critical examination of systemic justice and transnational ethical responsibility characteristic of advanced ideological and political theory coursework.

4.3. From Guided Learning to Independent Inquiry

The pedagogical shift from guided learning to independent inquiry constitutes a critical dimension of progressive development between the two educational stages. In high school ideological and political courses, learning activities are predominantly structured around teacher-led instruction, standardized exercises, and compliance-oriented tasks that cultivate foundational study habits and basic analytical skills. Students are expected to master prescribed content, respond to structured prompts, and demonstrate understanding through convergent assessments. College ideological and political theory courses, by contrast, presuppose a qualitatively different learner disposition, one characterized by intellectual autonomy, critical argumentation, and self-directed scholarly engagement [14]. Seminar discussions, independent reading assignments, and research-based projects require students to formulate original positions, evaluate competing perspectives, and sustain reasoned arguments without continuous external scaffolding. This transition is neither abrupt nor automatic; it unfolds gradually and depends substantially on the degree to which expectations are aligned across institutional stages. When high school curricula cultivate nascent capacities for independent thought within guided frameworks, and when college instruction acknowledges the developmental trajectory students have traversed, the progression

toward autonomous inquiry becomes coherent rather than discontinuous. Misalignment in these expectations risks producing a cognitive gap that undermines both learner confidence and pedagogical effectiveness [8].

5. Comparison and Challenges

5.1. Curricular Misalignment and Redundancy

The articulation between secondary and tertiary ideological and political education is frequently undermined by curricular misalignment, wherein overlapping content fails to translate into progressively higher cognitive demand. When both stages address analogous thematic domains without a deliberate escalation in analytical rigor, the college curriculum risks appearing as a mere reiteration of prior learning rather than an intellectual advancement. As detailed in Table 3, which presents a qualitative comparison of articulation challenges, the first challenge area, content redundancy, manifests in high school as the introduction of broad themes and foundational narratives, while college revisits similar themes with greater theoretical depth; the integration risk is student disengagement if repetition is not differentiated. The second area, depth mismatch, reveals that high school emphasizes concrete examples and moral lessons, whereas college demands abstract analysis and critical evaluation, creating a risk of cognitive gap and uneven preparation. The third area, pedagogical transition, contrasts structured instruction and frequent assessment in high school with lectures, seminars, and independent study in college, posing a risk of abrupt shift in learning expectations. Collectively, these misalignments indicate that redundancy is not merely a matter of duplicated topics but of insufficient differentiation in cognitive demand, which can erode the perceived value of college coursework and diminish student motivation.

Table 3. Qualitative Comparison of Articulation Challenges

Challenge Area	High School Manifestation	College Manifestation	Integration Risk
Content Redundancy	Introduction of broad themes and foundational narratives	Revisiting similar themes with greater theoretical depth	Student disengagement if repetition is not differentiated
Depth Mismatch	Emphasis on concrete examples and moral lessons	Demand for abstract analysis and critical evaluation	Cognitive gap and uneven preparation
Pedagogical Transition	Structured instruction and frequent assessment	Lectures, seminars, and independent study	Abrupt shift in learning expectations

5.2. Pedagogical Discontinuities

The transition from high school to college ideological and political education entails a pronounced pedagogical shift that frequently disrupts student adjustment [9]. In high school, instruction remains tightly structured, characterized by teacher-centered guidance, frequent formative assessment, and textbook-anchored lesson delivery that prioritizes memorization and standardized responses. College courses, by contrast, adopt lecture-based instruction supplemented by seminars, independent reading assignments, and critical writing tasks that demand autonomous inquiry and analytical argumentation. This discontinuity in instructional modality produces uneven learning outcomes: students habituated to externally imposed structure may struggle with the self-regulation that college pedagogy presumes. The resulting adjustment difficulties manifest not merely as procedural confusion but as substantive gaps in critical thinking capacity, since the analytical competencies cultivated through college methods were rarely rehearsed at the secondary level. Consequently, the pedagogical rupture between stages undermines the progressive development that curricular alignment ostensibly seeks to achieve, leaving students to bridge the methodological divide largely on their own [6].

5.3. Assessment and Outcome Gaps

Assessment misalignments further complicate the progression between secondary and tertiary ideological and political education [4]. High school evaluation systems predominantly measure factual recall, basic comprehension, and observable conduct, rewarding students for reproducing established conclusions. By contrast, college assessment prioritizes argumentation, independent research, and critical analysis, requiring students to construct and defend reasoned positions [5, 14]. These divergent evaluative signals obscure what progression actually means in practice. Students who performed successfully under one assessment regime may find their established study strategies inadequate under another, while educators lack shared benchmarks for defining readiness. Consequently, the outcome gap between the two stages is not merely a matter of content coverage but reflects fundamentally different conceptions of what constitutes successful learning. Without deliberate alignment of assessment philosophies and expectations, the transition from high school to college ideological and political courses risks producing discontinuities that undermine the intended progressive development of students' theoretical understanding and analytical capabilities.

6. Future Perspectives

6.1. Curriculum Articulation and Standard Alignment

Aligning curriculum standards across educational tiers is essential for clarifying the depth, sequence, and expected outcomes of ideological and political education. Mapping overlapping topics to differentiated cognitive levels ensures that students encounter increasingly complex conceptual demands as they advance. A conceptual predictive trend chart can illustrate this progression, demonstrating how integration and analytical complexity intensify over time without relying on numerical hardcoding. Such alignment prevents redundant instruction while fostering a coherent, developmentally appropriate learning trajectory that bridges secondary and tertiary education [11, 14].

6.2. Pedagogical Innovation and Teacher Collaboration

To bridge the gap between concrete and abstract learning, cross-level teacher collaboration is essential. Joint curriculum design and shared pedagogical strategies can significantly reduce discontinuities. Implementing active learning, case-based discussion, and reflective writing helps students transition smoothly. Such collaboration ensures a progressive development of critical thinking, aligning high school and college courses effectively [6].

6.3. Student-Centered Progression and Lifelong Learning

A student-centered progression repositions ideological and political education as a continuous, lifelong endeavor rather than a sequence of disconnected stages. Curricular articulation should cultivate metacognitive awareness, enabling learners to monitor and regulate their own reasoning as they advance from guided comprehension toward independent judgment [3]. By emphasizing critical thinking and civic agency, such an approach empowers students to interrogate complex social realities autonomously. This developmental trajectory ultimately sustains civic commitment beyond formal schooling, embedding reflective, self-directed learning as a durable foundation for lifelong participation in public life.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Synthesis of Overlap and Progression

The analysis reveals that substantial content overlap between high school ideological and political courses and college ideological and political theory courses manifests across values, theoretical foundations, historical narratives, and policy content. Progression emerges through increasing cognitive complexity, expanding moral scope, enhanced learning agency, and more sophisticated assessment. Overlap itself is not inherently problematic; it becomes problematic only when depth is not differentiated. These findings

suggest that effective curriculum articulation requires deliberate differentiation of cognitive demand rather than mere avoidance of repetition.

7.2. Implications for Curriculum Design

Curriculum designers should reconceptualize content overlap as a foundation for progressive development rather than duplication. This requires implementing spiral sequencing that revisits core concepts with increasing cognitive complexity, establishing clear stage-specific learning outcomes, and fostering cross-level collaboration among high school and college educators. Assessment alignment must reflect these differentiated expectations, ensuring that evaluations measure the depth of understanding appropriate to each stage. Teachers and policymakers need shared expectations for student readiness to facilitate a coherent and cumulative learning trajectory.

7.3. Concluding Remarks

Coherent ideological and political education fundamentally depends on deliberate articulation between secondary and tertiary stages. By distinguishing content overlap from progressive development, this analysis provides a structured framework for reducing redundancy while enhancing cumulative learning outcomes. The findings underscore that effective articulation is not merely a matter of curricular alignment but requires sustained attention to pedagogical sequencing and cognitive scaffolding. Future research should prioritize the implementation and empirical evaluation of articulation strategies across diverse institutional contexts, thereby translating conceptual insights into actionable practices that strengthen the overall coherence of ideological and political education.

Funding: This study is supported by the 2026 Hainan Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning Project (Special Project on Ideological and Political Education): "Research on the Current Status and Development Paths of the Instructional Connection Between High School Ideological and Political Courses and College Ideological and Political Theory Courses" (Grant No. hnsz2026-07).

References

1. R. Fiala, "Educational ideology and the school curriculum," in *School Knowledge in Comparative and Historical Perspective: Changing Curricula in Primary and Secondary Education*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2007, pp. 15–34.
2. M. R. Olneck, "The recurring dream: Symbolism and ideology in intercultural and multicultural education," *American Journal of Education*, vol. 98, no. 2, pp. 147–174, 1990.
3. A. Breidlid, "Ideology, cultural values and education: The case of Curriculum 2005," *Perspectives in Education*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 83–102, 2003.
4. M. Zembylas, "'Structures of feeling' in curriculum and teaching: Theorizing the emotional rules," *Educational Theory*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 187–208, 2002.
5. G. M. Anderson, M. Alfonso, and J. C. Sun, "Rethinking cooling out at public community colleges: An examination of fiscal and demographic trends in higher education and the rise of statewide articulation agreements," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 108, no. 3, pp. 422–451, 2006.
6. H. A. Giroux and A. N. Penna, "Social education in the classroom: The dynamics of the hidden curriculum," *Theory & Research in Social Education*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 21–42, 1979.
7. L. Weis, G. Dimitriadis, and C. McCarthy, *Ideology, Curriculum, and the New Sociology of Education: Revisiting the Work of Michael Apple*. Routledge, 2013.
8. D. Cantoni, Y. Chen, D. Y. Yang, N. Yuchtman, and Y. J. Zhang, "Curriculum and ideology," *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 125, no. 2, pp. 338–392, 2017.
9. H. Giroux, "Toward a new sociology of curriculum," *Educational Leadership*, 1979.
10. L. H. McEneaney and J. W. Meyer, "The content of the curriculum: In institutionalist perspective," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Education*, 2000, pp. 189–211.
11. H. A. Giroux, *Ideology, Culture & the Process of Schooling*. Temple University Press, 1981.
12. M. W. Apple, "Curriculum as ideological selection," 1976.
13. W. Au, *Critical Curriculum Studies: Education, Consciousness, and the Politics of Knowing*. Routledge, 2012.
14. R. Moore and M. Young, "Knowledge and the curriculum in the sociology of education: Towards a reconceptualization," 2004.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Publisher and/or the editor(s). Publisher and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.