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Bringing Curriculum Theory and Didactics Together:

A Deweyan Perspective

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Abstract

Using Dewey's method of resolution for resolving a dualism exemplified in *The Child and the Curriculum*, this article reconciles and brings together two rival schools of thought—curriculum theory and didactics—in China. The central thesis is that the rapprochement requires a reconceptualization of curriculum theory and didactics in light of the Practical (Schwab [1970] 2013) and the German *Didaktik* tradition respectively, together with an understanding of their complementary relationship within the societal, institutional and instructional context of schooling. The article concludes by drawing implications for reconstructing curriculum theory and didactics within the context of China's recent curriculum reform and for the international dialogue of curriculum versus *Didaktik*.

Keywords: Curriculum theory; didactics; *Didaktik*; curriculum; teaching; John Dewey; the Practical

China's recent curriculum reform, initiated in 2001 and continuing today, is a national response in the education arena to the challenges of the 21st century—characterized by dramatic scientific and technological progress, an increasingly globalized economy, and intensified international competition. It is directed toward the need to develop a creative, innovative and self-motivated workforce through basic education (MOE 2001; The State Council 1999). The reform is also propelled by expectations and demands arising from rapid educational expansion over the last two decades of the 20th century—indicated by the achievement of nine-year compulsory education, the universalization of secondary education, and the massification of higher education in the late 1990s (Law 2014). The expectations and demands call for the development of a 'learner-oriented' curriculum centred on the needs and development of students rather than the transmission of academic knowledge (Huang 2004). The new curriculum reform, overall, aims at 'quality education' that helps all students achieve broad and balanced moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic development to meet the expectations and demands of China in the 21st century (Dello-Iacovo 2009; MOE 2001; The State Council 1999). This is intended to be a significant departure from the prevalent 'exam-oriented education' driven by preparing students for high-stakes examinations, with an exclusive emphasis on the transmission of academic knowledge and skills (Zhu 2007).

To implement the reform, the Ministry of Education (MOE) uses *curriculum standards* to replace traditional *instructional plans* (directed toward outlining the content of schooling for delivery in classrooms) that had long been used in the system (Huang 2004). Curriculum standards consist of statements of what students should know and be able to do in different school subjects over the course of schooling in terms of (1) knowledge and basic skills, (2) methods and processes, (3) attitudes and values (MOE 2001). Textbooks, teachers' guides, and examination requirements are modified in the light of the new goals and curriculum standards. Constructivist approaches to teaching are adopted to encourage inquiry

learning, cooperative learning, experiential learning, critical thinking and creativity. Teachers are expected to be guides and facilitators of learning rather than deliverers of knowledge, whereas students are expected to construct their knowledge system. Furthermore, by way of a tripartite system of curriculum administration,¹ the Ministry ascribes more active roles for provinces/municipalities and schools in curriculum making, encouraging local educational communities to develop their own curricula to meet diverse and complex needs across the country (MOE 2001; Zhu 2007).

The curriculum reform is informed by *a new curriculum discourse* consisting of ideas about standard-based curriculum making—shaped by American curricularists such as Ralph Tyler and Benjamin Bloom—and ideas about an egalitarian, dialogical approach to classroom teaching—largely influenced by American curriculum re-conceptualists and/or post-modernists noticeably William Pinar and William Doll (see G. Wu 2013). This curriculum discourse put into question the extant didactic discourse—shaped by Soviet pedagogue I. A. Kairov—which, for many decades, had informed the development of instructional plans and classroom practice in China. The reform, some educationists argued (e.g., Q.Q. Zhong 2003a; Zhong and You 2005), calls for a reconceptualization of basic educational concepts. The implementation of the reform has given rise to an ongoing curriculum-didactics debate, also called Zhong-Wang debate, reflecting a paradigmatic war between curriculum theory and didactics.

The ‘meeting’ between curriculum theory and didactics can also be seen in many European countries (see Hopmann and Gundem 1998; Karseth and Sivesind 2010; Pantić and Wubbels 2012; Terhart 2012). Curriculum theory, largely associated with America and English-speaking countries, refers to a body of concepts, models and discourses concerning the relationship between school and society, the nature of schooling, curriculum planning,

development, and implementation or enactment in school and classroom (Hopmann and Riquarts 2000; Westbury 2000). On the other hand, didactics (*Didaktik* in German), largely associated with German and German speaking countries, refers to a theory of teaching and learning embedded in a social and institutional context of schooling, concerning state-curriculum planning and classroom enactment (Hopmann 2007; also see Arnold and Lindner-Müller 2012). These two traditions of educational thinking are significantly different in ideological orientation, theoretical underpinning, and institutional commitment (Reid 1998a; Westbury 2000). How they can be reconciled and brought together is at the heart of the international dialogue of curriculum versus *Didaktik* (see Gudem and Hopmann 1998; Westbury, Hopmann, and Riquarts 2000) that has captured tremendous interest in the international community over the last two decades (see, e.g., Biesta 2011; Hamilton 2001; Shirley 2008).

Using Dewey's method of resolution for resolving a dualism, this article reconciles and brings together curriculum theory and didactics in China. I start with examining the paradigmatic war reflected in the curriculum-didactics debate, and expound Dewey's method of resolution exemplified in *The Child and the Curriculum*. This is followed by the identification of the promises and problems of curriculum theory and didactics in China, and afterward a discussion of how curriculum theory and didactics need to be re-conceptualized. I next move to address how curriculum theory and didactics can be brought together in a complementary manner. I conclude by addressing implications for reconstructing curriculum theory and didactics in China and for the international dialogue of curriculum versus *Didaktik*.

The curriculum-didactics debate

The Zhong-Wang debate was spurred by the publication of an article by Ce-san Wang, a distinguished professor of didactics at Beijing Normal University. In that article C. S. Wang (2004) warned against the tendency in the new curriculum discourse to weaken the importance of transmitting disciplinary knowledge to students. The essence of curriculum, he argued, is constituted by disciplinary knowledge—an important basis for developing students' understanding, worldviews, abilities, values, and attitudes. So, teaching involves 'opening up' knowledge to facilitate such development, whereas learning entails 'internalizing' knowledge.² Therefore, conventional methods like lecture and exam preparation always have a vital role to play in education. C. S. Wang's paper provoked a response from Qi-quan Zhong, a professor of curriculum theory at East China Normal University and a key architect of the curriculum reform. Linking the kind of education implied in C. S. Wang (2004) to 'elite', knowledge-based, and exam-oriented education, Q. Q. Zhong contended that the paper is based on outdated assumptions about knowledge, teaching and learning, reflecting the residual influence of Kairov's pedagogics imported from the former Soviet Union (Q.Q. Zhong and You 2005).

In a rejoinder, C. S. Wang (2008) provided a defense of Kairov's pedagogics. As an important historical achievement of pedagogics reflecting the character of modern schooling, Wang asserted, Kairov's theory contains basic educational concepts and principles of contemporary significance and provides an effective operational framework for practice in school and classroom. Likewise, he questioned the new curriculum discourse for its departure from the reality of school and classroom and its failure of providing a workable framework for practice. In response to C. S. Wang (2008), Q. Q. Zhong (2009) pointed out that Kairov's pedagogics is in fact a historical product of Stalin's regime (1924-1953) marked by a separation from social reality and a neglect of the interest and active role of children. Such a

theory promotes an authoritarian and dogmatic form of education that is teacher-centred and text-and exam-based, directed toward a systematic transmission of academic knowledge.

The debate has gone on between Zhong and Wang and between their followers (see Huang and Liu 2009). It reflects a war between two competing schools of thought, curriculum theory and didactics, which were imported to China during the last century. Didactics was first imported at the beginning of the 20th century through the introduction of Herbart's and Herbartian theories via Japan and, in the 1950s, was heavily influenced by Kairov's pedagogics imported from the Soviet Union—which had eventually become the 'standard' paradigm in pedagogic thinking (Deng 2012a). Traditional curriculum theory was first introduced to China through the translation of American curriculum texts like Bobbit's *The Curriculum* and *How to Make a Curriculum* into Chinese in the 1920s. And over the last two decades China's recent curriculum reform has created a demand for American contemporary curriculum theory—in addition traditional curriculum theory (see Zhang and Gao 2014).

In China curriculum theory and didactics, then, are found largely within the traditions of American curriculum theory and Kairov's pedagogics respectively. How curriculum theory and didactics can be reconciled and brought together is an important issue that has been discussed by a host of Chinese scholars (e.g., Cai and Wang 1998; Ding 2009; Huang 2000; Liao 2007; Liu 1996; Yang 2002). Some scholars propose grand curriculum theory to subsume didactics (e.g. Huang 2000). Others advocate grand didactics to encompass curriculum theory (e.g. Cai and Wang 1998). Still some believe that the two should be independent and complementary (e.g. Liao 2007). However, their attempts largely remain at an abstract, theoretical level, with no direct bearing on the practice and reality of school and classroom. They also overlook the inherent issues or problems of curriculum theory and

didactics and the issue of compatibility. It is at this junction that Dewey's method of resolution becomes particularly relevant, to which I now turn.

Dewey's method of resolution

D.C. Phillips (1998) provides a useful exposition of Dewey's method of resolution with reference to his seminal *The Child and the Curriculum*—in which Dewey ([1902] 1990) tackled the debate over the content of the curriculum between the 'old' and 'new' educators near the turn of the 20th century. The contestation arises, in Phillips' (1998, 407) words, because these two groups 'become wedded to one or another way of interpreting a problem situation' concerning the curriculum. The old educators insist that what children learn must be determined by the logical knowledge world of the adult embodied in academic disciplines, whereas the new educators hold that the experiential world of the child should determine what children learn.

The resolution of these two competing schools requires, first and foremost, examining their different ways of thinking (or interpreting) to discover their respective 'excesses' and 'truths' (D.C. Phillips 1998). The key issue (i.e., excess) of the new educators, according to Dewey (1902 [1990], 189), lies in their seeing the experience of the child as 'self-explanatory and self-contained' which must be set apart from specialized knowledge of academic studies. The new educators, however, bring to light those elements (facts, attitudes, motives, dispositions, etc.) 'stirring' in the child's experience that could be a vital vehicle for the child's development and growth. On the other hand, the key issue of the old educators lies in their seeing 'subject matter as something fixed and ready-made, outside the child experience'. The old educators, however, bring forth the fact that subject matters embodied in various academic studies are important resources for the development of the child.

Second, reconciliation entails re-conceptualising their different ways of thinking in a way that can abandon their excesses and preserve their truths (Phillips 1998). In *The Child and the Curriculum*, Dewey ([1902] 1990, 189-190) reconceptualised the notions of *subject matters* and *the experience of the child* respectively held by the old and new educators. For Dewey, subject matters embodied in various studies are neither ‘fixed’ and ‘ready-made’, nor independent of the child experience; they are special forms of human experience in consummation and therefore represent the ‘the possibilities of development inherent in the child’s immediate crude experience’. On the other hand, the experience of the child is neither ‘self-explanatory’ and ‘self-contained’, nor apart from subject matters; it contains elements (facts, attitudes, motives, dispositions, etc.) that are the indexes of growth (pertaining to the development of subject matters) and thus provide a vehicle for helping the child acquire the forms of human experiences represented by academic studies. By way of reconceptualization, Dewey ([1902] 1990, 189) thus ‘get rid of the prejudicial notion that there is some gap in kind [as distinct from degree] between the child’s experience and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study’.

The third (last) aspect of Dewey’s method requires locating a ‘reality’ where the two ways of thinking can be brought together complementarily. In *The Child and the Curriculum*, the *reality* is the teaching and learning process defined by a beginning and an end point: ‘we realize that the child and the curriculum [subject matters] are simply two limits which define a single process’. A common task for the two groups of educators is to construct a curriculum that entails ‘continuous reconstruction, moving from the child’s present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies’ (Dewey 1902 [1990], 189).

It is important to note that Dewey’s method of resolution, after all, is a result of his ‘naturalization’ of Hegel’s dialectic method (involving constructing a synthesis of thesis and

antithesis). Although moving away from Hegelian dialectic, Dewey had remained committed to the basic Hegelian notion that the world is an organic whole and cannot be reduced to isolated parts or elements. Then, in resolving dichotomous ways of thinking, one needs to locate what is essential not in parts or elements but in the ‘reality as a whole’ (Phillips 1971, 1998). It requires seeing teaching and learning as embedded within the broad institutional context of schooling. Such a notion of ‘reality’ provides an essential vantage point from which Dewey observes and interprets complex educational issues and clarifies confusions. In *The educational situation: As concerns the elementary school* Dewey (1902 [2001], 394) tackled the critical issue why, in spite of all reform efforts, those ‘new studies’ (organized according to the interest and experience of students) failed to take root in the school curriculum. He called attention to the reality that is not only ‘found in the personal and face-to-face contact of teacher and child’, but also deeply embedded in the institutional contexts of schooling (school organizational structures, administration mechanism, curriculum standards, expectations, frameworks, and so forth). It is the institutional contexts that ‘do not lend themselves to realizing the purposes of the newer studies’. As will be seen in this paper, such a notion of reality provides a useful perspective for considering how curriculum theory and didactics can be brought together, and for reconstructing curriculum theory and didactics in China as well.

Curriculum theory and didactics

To identify the promises and issues of the two schools of thought, I now look at their intellectual underpinnings, American curriculum theory and Kairov’s pedagogics.

Curriculum theory

The ‘quintessential articulation’ of American curriculum theory is found in Ralph Tyler’s (1949) *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Pinar et al. 1995, 15). The text remains the foundation of traditional curriculum theory to the present day, despite significant criticism from contemporary curriculum theory and discourse. Also called the *Tyler Rationale*, the text revolves around four central questions:

1. What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
2. What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
3. How can these educational experiences be effectively organized?
4. How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Purposes or objectives are supposed to be formulated through the following three sources: (1) studies of learners, (2) studies of contemporary life outside the school, and (3) suggestions from subject specialists. They are then supposed to be screened through the school’s philosophy of education and theories of learning (Tyler 1949).

Three essential features of traditional curriculum theory shared by the curriculum community in China can be identified with reference to the text. First, curriculum theory is *institutional* in orientation, principally concerned with the making of curricula for the school system to meet the needs of society. In this connection, curriculum theory is utilitarian because the school is seen as an agency for meeting the public “needs” through producing socially and economically competent citizens in existing social orders, by way of its curriculum (Westbury 2000). This orientation and commitment are clearly evident in China’s curriculum reform and the related discourse introduced earlier, and in many Chinese curriculum theory texts concerned with curriculum development in a school or school system (e.g., N.J. Ding 2007; F. Q. Huang 2006; H. Zhang 2000).

Second, curriculum making is largely a *technological* and *rationalistic* undertaking. It is technological in that curriculum making is characterized by a series of techniques for goal/objective formation, content selection, organization, assessment and evaluation. It is rationalistic in that curriculum planning entails the employment of models and frameworks based on scientific research and analysis (Westbury 2000). This technological and rationalistic orientation can also be seen in a large body of Chinese curriculum theory texts where curriculum making is largely construed in terms of procedures, techniques, and models or frameworks informed by scientific research (e.g., N.J. Ding 2007; F. Q. Huang 2006; H. Zhang 2000).

The third feature concerns the orientation of curriculum theory toward *reform*. The focus of curriculum theory is always on reforming or restructuring the school system through curriculum making in response to the needs of students, society and culture (Westbury 2000). The curriculum reform in China and its discourse are clearly directed toward reforming the school system in view of the perceived challenges and demands facing China in the 21st century. Such a reformist stance too is well taken by many Chinese curriculum scholars (e.g., Lu and Zhang 2000; Q. Q. Zhong 2003a, 2003b; Huang, Wang, and Yuan 2001).

Obviously, the promise of traditional curriculum theory is to provide models and frameworks for curriculum making to meet the needs of society. However, traditional curriculum theory has its limitations and issues. The institutional, technological, rationalistic and reformist features predispose traditional curriculum theory to focus on curriculum development at the institutional or system level, with the assumption that ‘teachers can, and should, faithfully implement the curriculum if it is well developed and teachers are appropriately prepared to use it’ (Westbury 2000, 20). Such a notion of teachers as curriculum implementers has been criticized by a body of literature arguing that the teacher is

a curriculum maker in the sense that the teacher creates learning experience in a classroom using his or her personal practical knowledge, in consideration of curriculum commonplaces—the teacher or self, students, subject matter, and milieu (see Clandinin and Connelly 1992; Graig and Ross 2008).

Furthermore, in contemporary curriculum theory, the technological and rationalistic character of traditional curriculum theory has been questioned for the neglect of the complexities, moral and aesthetic dimensions of school and classroom lives (see Pinar et al. 1995). Traditional curriculum theory too has been questioned for its unquestioning acceptance of the institutional priorities and its neglect of broad social and political issues that have an inexorable bearing on the school curriculum (e.g., Apple 2004; Kliebard 1992; Pinar et al. 1995). Moving away from a preoccupation with curriculum development, contemporary curriculum theory in the re-conceptualist paradigm concentrates on examining the life-world, subjective and/or inner-subjective experience, and political meaning of curriculum in and out of school (see Pinar et al. 1995; Pinar 2004). Contemporary curriculum theory in the neo-Marxist critical tradition focuses on studying the social and political nature of the curriculum in relation to the social, economic and political context of schooling (e.g., Anyon 1981; Apple 2004; Young 1970). Given the focus of this paper is on traditional curriculum theory that has largely informed China's current curriculum reform,³ it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of contemporary curriculum theory and discourse.

Didactics

The basic features of didactics shared within the didactics community in China can be identified with reference to the core text *Pedagogics*. Written by Kairov and associates in the late 1940s, the text was intended to guide the pedagogical practice of classroom teachers and

to provide a theoretical base for teacher training in the Soviet Union. The theory was formulated in the context of a centralized school system where instructional plans and syllabi from kindergarten to college were developed by the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences under the preview of the Ministry of Education (Medlin 1958).

Pedagogics was based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy and informed by European pedagogic thinking represented by Comenius, Herbart, and so forth. A particular branch of Marxist-Leninist philosophy, *dialectical materialism*,⁴ was used to establish ground rules that served to guide and inform the development of pedagogic concepts and principles.⁵ Like Herbart in *General Pedagogics (Allgemeine Pädagogik)*, Kairov articulated a full-scale science of education—a comprehensive body of theory or discourse concerning the aims of education, educational policy and constitution, didactics, school administration, upbringing, aesthetics, and physical education (Kairov et al. 1953; also see C. S. Wang 2008). Similarly, in the didactics community in China, dialectical materialism is widely held as an essential ideological and methodological base for the formation of didactic theories (Zhu and Liu 2009; also see Li and Li 2001; C. S. Wang 1985). And didactics is seen as a central component of (general) pedagogics in the European pedagogic tradition (Deng 2012; also see Li and Li 1991; Wang 1985).

Didactics refers to a theory of teaching and learning pertaining to implementing the state curriculum (instructional guidelines and syllabi) in the classroom. It is characterized by three essential aspects—goals, content, and methods (Künzli 1998). In Kairov’s text, the purposes of teaching are: (1) the mastery of basic knowledge of physical, social, and human sciences, (2) the development of cognitive skills and abilities, and (3) the cultivation of a socialist worldview (Kairov et al. 1953). These purposes are said to be based upon Marxist theory of all-round development of individuals,⁶ according to which the central aim of

school education is the development of ‘all-round developed persons’ for the socialist society, or the ‘active builders of the communist society’ (Kairov et al. 1953, 21). A very similar conception of purposes of teaching, together with Marxist theory of all-round development as an important theoretical base, can be seen in many didactics texts written by scholars in China (e.g., C. S. Wang 1985; Li and Li 2001; Tian and Li 1996).

Referring to systematic bodies of organized knowledge and skills that students are required to acquire during the process of instruction, content is essential for achieving central aims of education. It is prescribed and specified in instructional materials (instructional plans, syllabi, and textbooks), and conveyed through the ‘medium’ of instructional materials (Kairov et al 1953). Methods refer to the means through which the teacher helps students master the content codified in instructional materials. The selection and development of methods is informed by seven instructional principles, namely (1) students’ self-awareness and agency, (2) intuitiveness, (3) theory-reality connection, (4) systematicness and continuity, (5) consolidation, (6) receptiveness, and (7) individualized guidance. Furthermore, teachers are required to employ the five-step teaching method when planning and conducting a lesson, consisting of (1) reviewing old material, (2) introducing new material, (3) explaining new material, (4) consolidating newly-learned material, and (5) giving assignments (Kairov et al. 1953). Such notions of content and method can be seen in most Chinese didactics texts (e.g., Li and Li, 2001; Fei 2007; C. S. Wang 1985).

Evidently, the promise of didactics is to provide a theory (or theories) of teaching and learning within the context of implementing a state curriculum in schools and classrooms. However, Chinese didactics has inherent issues or problems. The above three basic features or aspects together show that didactics in China is directed toward the transmission of content (knowledge and skills) by means of a body of instructional methods and principles, with the primary aim of producing individuals needed for the socialist society. As such, Chinese

didactics is a far cry from the vision of didactics purported in Herbart's *General Pedagogics*—where the central purpose of teaching is the formation of the moral character of children according to their 'natural liveliness' (Hilgenbeger 1993), achieved not through the employment of formulaic pedagogical methods and techniques, but through 'an inviting unlocking of contents which stimulates understanding, and consequently elevates a child's *dialogue* with his or her world' (Krüger 2008, 227). Framed within the Kairov's framework, didactics in China in essence is a kind of Herbartian didactics that encourages prescriptive and procedural practice of teaching to achieve the social and political aims of schooling—where a concern for the formation of the free and independent individual doesn't exist (Deng 2013b).

Incompatibility

Apart from respective inherent problems, it is evident that the two schools are incompatible in ideological orientation and institutional commitment, due to their different theoretical traditions or underpinnings. Whereas curriculum theory is inextricably intertwined with the ideology of social utility (concerning the social and economic needs of a democratic society), didactics has an inextricable bearing on Marxist ideology of all-round development (dictated by the political needs of a communist society). Whereas the former endorses the role of scientific methods in constructing models and frameworks of curriculum making, didactics upholds the role of dialectical materialism in developing principles and models of classroom teaching. Also, whereas the former is inexorably associated with a decentralized school system where a local authority (e.g., a school board) initiates and controls the development of curricula for the school system, the latter with a centralized school system where the Ministry of Education takes charge of developing curricula for all schools in the system.

Then, in their current formulations, an attempt to yoke together curriculum theory and didactics—either by way of grand curriculum theory or of grand didactics as proposed by Chinese educationists noted earlier—could lead to conflict and tension, because of their incompatible ideological orientations and institutional commitments. Such an attempt overlooks the issues or problems associated with curriculum theory and didactics as well. Therefore, a workable attempt to bring curriculum theory and didactics together requires a re-conceptualization of curriculum theory and of didactics that can address the tension and their respective issues or problems.

The Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition

Their re-conceptualizations can be respectively found in the Schwab's the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition.

The Practical

In his seminal, ground-breaking paper Schwab ([1970] 2013, 591) characterized the crisis in curriculum theory in the 1960s in terms of 'flights' from the subject of the field,⁷ due to 'inveterate, unexamined and mistaken reliance on *theory*'. According to Schwab, the field was inaccurately positioned as a 'theoretic' undertaking directed toward the pursuit of general knowledge (curriculum concepts, principles, and models applicable to a wide range of situations), under the strong influence of behavioural sciences, social sciences, and the psychometric paradigm.

To overcome the crisis, curriculum studies must be repositioned as a 'practical' field, with three basic propositions. First and foremost, curriculum is centrally concerned with curriculum practice (e.g., curriculum planning, development, and classroom teaching) with the intention to improve the work of schooling. This position is in line with the 'craft'

tradition of American curriculum theory typified in the Tyler rationale (Westbury 2005). It maintains the *institutional* and (somehow) reformist orientation or commitment of traditional curriculum theory. On the other hand, for Schwab, curriculum is a normative undertaking animated and informed by a particular vision of what education should be—not a technological enterprise directed toward predetermined outcomes and objectives as often conceived in traditional curriculum theory (Reid 1984, 1998b).

Second, curriculum practice deals with specific content, specific learners, and a specific context—rather than with general concepts and theoretical principles. According to Schwab,

[C]urriculum is brought to bear, not on ideal or abstract representations, but on the real thing, on the concrete case, in all its completeness and with all its differences from all other concrete cases, on a large body of fact concerning which the theoretic abstraction is silent. The materials of a concrete curriculum will not consist merely of portions of “science,” of “literature,” of “process.” On the contrary, their constituents will be particular assertions about selected matters couched in a particular vocabulary, syntax and rhetoric... There will be perceptions conditioned by particular past conditionings of particular things and events. The curriculum constituted of these particulars will be brought to bear, not in some archetypical classroom, but in a particular locus in time and space with smells, shadows, seats, and conditions outside its walls which may have much to do with what is achieved inside. Above all, the supposed beneficiary is not the generic child, not even a class or kind of child out of the psychological or sociological literature pertaining to the child. The beneficiary will consist of very local kinds of children and, within the local kinds, individual children. (611)

This proposition foregrounds the contextual, situational, and experiential dimensions of curriculum practice, calling for a sophisticated understanding of issues and problems surrounding curriculum practice in schools and classrooms. It puts into question in traditional curriculum theory the search for general curriculum models, frameworks, and procedures based on scientific research. And it calls for the role of classroom teachers to be that of curriculum makers rather than curriculum implementers as conceived in traditional curriculum theory.

Third, curriculum practice entails a decision-making process that addresses specific issues and problems arising from a desire for improvement—concerning content, students, and the teacher within a specific context. These issues and problems are tackled in their contextual specificity through deliberation and by eclectically considering a range of appropriate theories (Schwab [1970] 2013). As such, deliberative and reflective decision making entails a dynamic and balanced consideration of the four curriculum commonplaces—teachers, students, subject matter and milieu (Schwab 1973).

Overall, the Practical adopts an ‘interpretive’, ‘humanistically-oriented’ approach to curriculum practice that can overcome issues and limitations inherent in the technological and rationalistic approach in traditional curriculum theory (Reid 1999). This approach, Eisner (1984, 192) argued, holds ‘the greatest promise for the improvement of those decisions that those who plan school programs must make’. Reid (1999) extended the Practical to a wider institutional context of schooling, arguing that the approach is applicable to all levels of curriculum development, including policymaking, program development and classroom practice. Likewise, Westbury (1994) explored the implication of the Practical within the institutional context of schooling (involving an authoritative, centralized curriculum framework), making a case for the possibility of a deliberative approach to curriculum making at the school/classroom level that mediates between the direction of a central agency (e.g., a ministry of education) and the practical engagements with specific curriculum problems in school and classroom. In other words, the Practical can resolve the tension between local and center curriculum making that exists between curriculum theory and didactics noted above.

The German Didaktik tradition

There are many branches of didactics in Germany, such as *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik* (*Bildungstheoretische Didaktik*), Berliner *Didaktik*, and Psychological *Didaktik* (H. Meyer 2013; also see Arnold and Linder-Müller 2012). *Bildung*-centred *Didaktik*, also called the German *Didaktik* tradition, is the main one that has had an enduring impact on classroom practice and teacher education in Continental Europe (Gundem 2000)—and the focus of this discussion.

As a reconceptualization of Herbartian didactics, the German *Didaktik* tradition provides a way to re-conceptualize didactics in China which, as noted earlier, is Herbartian in orientation and strongly influenced by Marxist-Leninist doctrines. Arising from criticism of Herbartian didactics, the German *Didaktik* tradition calls for a revisit of the original thinking of Herbart and Kant (Hamilton 1999; Hopmann and Riqarts 2000; Kansanan 1999). It positions didactics within the realm of human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) rather than natural science (*Naturwissenschaften*), and grounds it in the thinking of European Enlightenment.⁸ The tradition is animated by the image of a ‘responsible and socially aware person contributing to his or her own destiny and capable of knowing, feeling, and acting’ as implied in the below notion of *Bildung* (Gundem 2000, 242). As alluded earlier, such a concept of an individual is essentially lacking in Chinese didactics framed in the Kairov’s tradition.

The German *Didaktik* tradition employs a hermeneutic approach to understanding and theorizing practice in classroom, with three distinctive features. First, practice is an essential point of departure for theory development. ‘[T]he only legitimate approach to theory building’, Gundem (2000, 241) argued, ‘is to examine the educational phenomena as they exist in the practice of teaching and schooling’. Second, practice is embedded in a specific context where practice occurs. Third, theory building necessarily takes into account the

complexity of context —past, present and future. It needs respect for the complexities embedded in the interplay of schooling, teaching and learning.

The tradition provides a theory of teaching and learning pertaining to implementing the state curriculum in classroom. The three basic aspects—purposes, content, and methods—are construed very differently from those in Chinese didactics within the framework of Kairov. The central purpose of teaching is encapsulated in the notion of *Bildung* which is centered on the formation of the mind, the development of intellectual and moral powers or faculties, and the cultivation of liberty, dignity and freedom (Hopmann 2007; Humboldt [1973] 2000). Acquiring *Bildung* entails seeking to ‘grasp as much [of the] world as possible’ and making contributions to human mankind through developing one’s own powers and faculties (Humboldt [1973] 2000, 58). As such, *Bildung* is fundamentally different from the notion of education based on Marxist theory of all-rounded development, which is determined by the needs of a communist society.

Unlike in Chinese didactics where content is held as a body of knowledge and skills for students’ acquisition and mastery, in the German *Didaktik* tradition content is construed as an important resource for *Bildung* (Klafki 2000). All German states have a well-articulated state curriculum framework, the *Lehrplan*, which lays out school subjects and their contents. The framework, however, does not prescribe meanings associated with contents, which are to emerge from the encounter of the individual learner and the content in the classroom (Hopmann 2007). Contents, characteristically defined by curriculum designers as the *contents of education (Bildungsinhalt)*, are the result of authoritative selection and organization of the wealth of the conceivable knowledge, experiences, and wisdom for *Bildung*. Content is construed as comprising *educational substance (Bildungsgehalt)*—essential elements, aspects or structures that contribute to *Bildung*. However, it becomes

educative only when interpreted by teachers who are directed in their work by the aim of *Bildung* (Klafki 2000).

Accordingly, teachers are granted with a high level of professional autonomy to interpret and enact the state-mandated curriculum (Hopmann 2007). They are seen as professionals ‘working within, but not directed by’ the state curriculum framework, informed by the idea of *Bildung* and the *Didaktik* way of thinking (Westbury 2000, 26). Teaching is construed as a “fruitful encounter” between content and the learner (Klafki 2000). For this, the teacher is required to be centrally concerned with interpreting and analyzing content for educational meaning and significance in view of *Bildung*. As Künzli (1998, 39-40) explained,

A didactician looks for a prospective object of learning...and he asks himself what this object can and should signify for the student and how student can experience this significance.... All other questions and problems—other than the significance of the learning content—such as class management, individual and social learning, learning control, individual learning speed, appropriate representation, etc.—are subordinate to this central concern and gain significance only when the question of educative substance (*Bildungsgehalt*) is at issue.

The search for methods is thus the final step—the ‘crowning’ moment in instructional preparation (Klafki 2000). The German *Didaktik* tradition ‘does not offer methods/procedures but a rich set of normative frameworks for thinking about the interstices of pedagogical encounter itself’ (Shirley 2008, 38). This arrests the prescriptive and dogmatic tendency toward classroom teaching in Herbartian didactics—and also in Chinese didactics framed within the Kairov’s framework.

It is worth noting an important development in the German *Didaktik* tradition. Wolfgang Klafki, informed by critical social theory, developed what is called *critical-constructive Didaktik* that is a revision and extension of *Bildung*-centered *Didaktik*, with a focus on the development of self-determination (autonomy) co-determination (participation) and solidarity (see Klafki 1998). Through integrating *Didaktik* with a critical theory of

society in the tradition of Horkheimer and Adorno, Klafki opened up *Bildung*-centered *Didaktik* for critical curricular and pedagogical theories and discourses (Klafki 1998, 2001; also see Arnold and Linder-Müller 2012).

Overall, the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition can be seen as respectively providing a re-conceptualization of curriculum theory and of didactics that can, on the one hand, preserve their respective features (or merits) and, on the other, resolve their respective problems or issues.

Furthermore, the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition are highly compatible, thus avoiding the tension of curriculum theory and didactics. Despite being developed in different cultural and institutional contexts, the Practical and German *Didaktik* tradition adopt a rather similar way of thinking about practice. Both are centrally concerned with practice (policymaking, curriculum development, and classroom teaching) pertaining to the ‘inner work of schooling’ (Westbury 2007). Both view practice as embedded in the institutional context in which schools operate and function. Furthermore, both construe practice as an interpretive and deliberative undertaking having to do with the interplay of subject matter, students, and a teacher within a particular milieu (Hamilton 2001; Hopmann 2011). The compatibility of the Practical with the German *Didaktik* tradition has been noted by other scholars as well (e.g., Hopmann 2011; Künzli 2013).

Nevertheless, the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition are not without problems. The former is animated by a version of liberal education concerned primarily with the cultivation of intellectual powers and moral reasoning capacities of individuals through academic disciplines, enabled by a liberal curriculum that promoted conversations, discourses and practical inquiry through a learning community (Reid 1984). The latter is underpinned by a vision of education in terms of *Bildung* which historically has been ‘charged’ with the

interest and sentiment of the middle class, together with ‘the utopian hopes of enlightenment and the appropriation of these hopes’ (Hansen 2008, 93). As such, inherent in Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition is a tendency to overlook the existing social, cultural, economic and political expectations and demands for education and schooling, as well as the translation of those expectations and demands into curriculum content and into classroom practice. These issues must be kept in mind when we draw on the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition to rethink and re-conceptualize curriculum theory and didactics in China. I now turn to discuss how curriculum theory and didactics can be brought together complementarily.

Bringing curriculum theory and didactics together

As noted earlier, the last aspect of Dewey’s method involves finding a ‘reality’ where the two schools of thought can be brought together in a complementary manner. Broadly construed, the reality (teaching and learning) is embedded in the three layers of context in which schools are nested and function:

the *societal context* (international and national milieus, social structures and conditions, social expectations on schooling, etc.);

the *institutional context* (educational policies, school types, streams or tracks, programs, school subjects, grade-levels, assessment and examination requirements, etc.); and

the *instructional context* (school and classroom cultures, teacher and student characteristics, teacher-student interactions, classroom activities, outside-classroom activities, etc.) (Alexander 2000; J. W. Meyer 1980).

These three layers of context are interrelated and intersecting, and together provide an essential vantage point from which we understand how curriculum theory and didactics are related and complement one another.

Curriculum theory and didactics have different loci of concern seen from the three layers of context. The former (here including both the traditional and the contemporary) is primarily concerned with issues in the *societal-institutional* realm—issues concerning *both* the making of an institutional curriculum for a school system with respect to the expectations and demands of society and culture *and* the political nature of the curriculum within the societal, institutional, and instructional context of schooling. However, issues of this kind tend to be ignored in didactics where an institutional curriculum is largely taken as given and, more often than not, are not open to question (see Alexander 2000). After all, didactics is principally concerned with issues in the *institutional-instructional* arena—concerning the interplay of the state curriculum and its local enactment in classrooms. Issues of this type, on the other hand, are normally not the focus of curriculum theory and research.⁹

Curriculum theory and didactics, then, can be complementary and mutually beneficial to each other. Curriculum theory can supplement didactics by offering theories and frameworks concerning curriculum making (or re-making) in response to the expectations and demands of society and culture, as well as concerning the socio-political nature of schooling within the broad social, cultural and institutional context. Curriculum theory, as Hopmann and Riquarts (2000, 4) point out, can teach didactics ‘important lessons concerning the relationship between school and society, on the nature and scope of educational planning, and on the socially constructed character of schooling’. Didactics, on the other hand, can complement curriculum theory by showing how an institutional curriculum developed by the state can be translated into classroom practice in a way that facilitates a meaningful encounter between learners and content. It, too, can show curriculum theory how teachers can be

autonomous professionals working within the framework of the institutional curriculum (Hopmann 2007; Westbury 2000).

Nevertheless, their complementary relationship presupposes that curriculum theory and didactics be viewed within the societal, institutional and instructional context of school and classroom, in light of the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition.

Concluding Remarks

This paper reconciles and brings together two competing schools of thought—curriculum theory and didactics—in China by way of Dewey’s method of resolution. The discussion so far has been focused on traditional curriculum theory and didactics—centrally concerned with institutional curriculum making and classroom teaching respectively. It is important to bear in mind that both institutional curriculum making and classroom teaching are sites of contestation inextricably intertwined with political issues of power, politics, class, race, and gender (see Apple 2004; Pinar et al. 1995; Young 1971). The political nature of curriculum making and classroom teaching, while not the focus of this article, must be taken into consideration if we are to gain a more sophisticated, politically-informed understanding of bringing curriculum theory and didactics together. Contemporary curriculum theory and discourse need to be brought to bear on the discussion.

Overall, to employ Dewey’s method of resolution is to challenge the approaches used by Chinese educational scholars to merging the two schools of thought—approaches that, as mentioned earlier, ignore the inherent issues and tension of curriculum theory and didactics and are devoid of concern for the reality of school and classroom. The article brings forth the need to ascertain the promises, issues, and tension of the two schools, and in so doing, invites Chinese educationists to explore the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition that can preserve their promises and overcome their issues and tension. Furthermore, the article

challenges Chinese educationists to seek reconciliation within and with reference to the reality of school and classroom in China. In other words, bringing curriculum theory and didactics together is not a matter of mere abstract theorizing, but of understanding how the two schools can be brought to bear to enhance our understanding about the nature and inner work of schooling (i.e. teaching and learning) within the societal, institutional and instructional context of schooling in China.

However, as already mentioned, both the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition have a tendency to overlook the existing social, economic and cultural expectations and demands for education and schooling, and the translation of those demands and expectations into the curriculum and into pedagogical practice in classroom. This tendency, nevertheless, can be overcome by reconstructing Chinese curriculum theory and didactics grounded in the reality of China. Apart from the need for re-conceptualization in view of the Practical and the German *Didaktik* tradition, Chinese curriculum theory and didactics need to be reconstructed within the context or reality of China's recent curriculum reform. Broadly construed, this context or reality can be characterized in terms of (1) the new social, economic, and cultural expectations and demands for education, (2) related new aims of schooling, curriculum structures, programs and school subjects (provided to different school types), and (3) related new ways of teaching and learning in school and classroom, among others (see Deng 2012b).

The reconstruction can be facilitated by adopting Connelly and Xu's (2010) approach to educational inquiry and theory development—an approach that, informed by Schwab's the Practical, is highly compatible with the German *Didaktik* tradition (Deng 2013b). According to Connelly and Xu, issues pertaining to the inner work and practice of schooling (policymaking, curriculum development, classroom teaching, and so forth) provide an essential starting point for educational inquiry and theory development. These issues are viewed as embedded in the global, national, cultural, institutional, and instructional context of

schooling, and tackled in their contextual complexity by eclectically bringing to bear on investigation and theory building a wide range of theories and discourses. The adoption of this approach to reconstructing Chinese curriculum theory and didactics, as I have argued elsewhere (Deng 2012a, 2013c), invites Chinese educationists to identify important questions and issues pertaining to practice (policy-making, curriculum development, classroom teaching) that provide a useful starting point for reconstructing curriculum and didactical theories grounded in the current realities of China. Inquiry into these questions and issues in turn calls for a thorough, well-informed understanding of various social, cultural, and institutional aspects of education and schooling both in China and in the international arena. Furthermore, it requires an eclectic use of theories and discourses—Western, Eastern or Chinese—in the process of inquiry and theory building, wherein borrowed (foreign) theories and discourses are reinterpreted and modified according to the specific situation and context of China.

The way of reconciling and bringing together curriculum theory and didactics together in the article carries implications for the international dialogue of curriculum versus *Didaktik*. Curriculum and didactics scholars must go beyond the discussion of the natures of and relationship between the two traditions and identify their respective contributions as well as issues and limitations. Furthermore, they must investigate how the two traditions need to be reconstructed within the current global, international, national, socio-cultural, institutional and instructional context of schooling, with close attention to the inner work and practice of school and classroom. This task has become highly relevant and urgent in view of the current increasingly globalized and interconnected world which puts both curriculum theory and didactics into question (Pettersson et al 2015). The above approach to theory reconstruction (I believe) can facilitate the development of ‘transnational curriculum theory’ called by Pettersson et al (2015, 2) in their current revisit of the Curriculum versus *Didaktik*

international dialogue, as it takes into account how public education and schooling are shaped in an era when the nation state systems ‘are undergoing transformation within highly interdependent transnational spaces.’ It can contribute to the development of ‘transactional didactics’ as well.

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¹ There are three levels of curriculum administration, the national (i.e., the MOE), the local (provinces and municipalities), and the school.

² This bears a resemblance to teaching and learning in German *Didaktik* tradition (cf. Klafki 2001). However, as will be shown in this essay, the former is directed toward the development of individuals needed for the socialist society, whereas the latter is animated and informed by the idea of *Bildung*.

³ However, re-conceptualist and/or post-modernist curriculum theory seems to only have an influence at the policy and theoretical level, concerning the use of an egalitarian, dialogical approach to classroom teaching (see Wu 2013)

⁴ Dialectical materialism, the ‘official’ interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, was formulated in the 1930s by Stalin and his associates. It is a theory about the organization and evolution of complex natural and social forms. Blakeley (1975, 29) explains:

This whole series of forms (mechanical, physical, chemical, biological and social) is distributed according to complexity from lower to higher. This seriation expresses their mutual bonds in terms of structure and in terms of history. The general laws of the lower forms of the motion of matter keep their validity for all the higher forms but they are subject to the higher laws and do not have a prominent role. They change their activity because of changed circumstances. Laws can be general or specific, depending on their range of applicability. The specific laws fall under the special sciences and the general laws are the province of diamat.

⁵ For example, pedagogic principles need to follow the basic rules of dialectical materialism such as ‘progression from simple to complex’ and ‘development from lower to higher stages’.

⁶ According to Marx, a communist society presupposes that all individuals be fully developed in all dimensions, intellectual, physical, moral, social, relational, and so forth, and it is only in a communist society that such a full development can be possible (Kairov et al. 1953).

⁷ Six flights include namely (1) flight of the field, (2) flight upward, (3) flight downward, (4) flight to the sideline, (5) flight into perseveration, and (6) flight into ‘eristic, contentious, and ad hominem debates’ (see Schwab [1970] 2013, 603-604).

⁸ Enlightenment thinking in Europe, according to Gudem (2000), is associated with Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schiller, Pestalozzi, Herbart, Schleiermacher, Fichte, Hegel, Froebel and Diesterweg.

⁹ This has something to do with the fact that in the United States a centralized, state-based curriculum literally doesn’t exist. In academic literature externally-developed curriculum materials (embodiments of an institutional curriculum) are often seen as obstacles of classroom teaching, limiting and constraining the professional

autonomy and creativity of teachers. Good teachers are often portrayed as ones who reject or do not follow externally-developed curriculum guidelines or materials, but develop their own curriculum (see Ball and Cohen 1996).

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