

Understanding Life-Practice Pedagogics—A Distinctively Educational Way of Thinking and Theorizing With Chinese Characteristics

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journals.sagepub.com/home/roe**Zongyi Deng** (邓宗怡) 

University College London

Abstract

Purpose: This article provides an interpretation of the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics by locating it within the Chinese pedagogic tradition and within the context of China's social and economic transition at the turn of the 21st century.

Design/Approach/Methods: As a theoretical essay, the article focuses on interpreting Lan Ye's *Return and Breakthrough: The Outline of Life-Practice Pedagogics*, with reference to her other related writings. It draws on theoretical sources from continental *Pädagogik* and Anglo-American educational theory.

Findings: Squarely in the tradition of *Pädagogik*, Life-Practice pedagogics exhibits a distinctively educational way of thinking and theorizing—in terms of education as self-formation (*Bildung*), education as purposeful activities or practice (*Erziehung*), and the dignity of practice. It is also a distinctive Chinese construction rooted in the reality of China and nourished by Chinese educational traditions, with its own unique research methodology.

Originality/Value: The construction of Life-Practice pedagogics provides a powerful case of how education can be established as distinctive discipline in the 21st century and of how pedagogics in

Corresponding author:

Zongyi Deng, Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London, WC1H 0AL, UK.

Email: zongyi.deng@ucl.ac.uk

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China can be revitalized in today's context. This article calls for a rediscovery of the essence of education in the current context of the "learnification" of educational discourse and a multiplicity of educational fads.

Keywords

Bildung, Chinese education, educational theory, *Erziehung*, Lan Ye, Life-Practice pedagogics

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Introduction

The publication of *Life-Practice Educology* in 2020 was celebratory as it is the very first English book introducing the remarkable work of Lan Ye (叶澜) to a broad international audience. Ye, a distinguished professor at East China Normal University, has made a significant contribution to educational theorizing and school improvement in China. As an ambitious attempt to rebuild pedagogics (教育学) in China, she and her colleagues have constructed "Life-Practice pedagogics" (生命·实践 教育学) over the course of implementing New Basic Education—an extensive research program aiming at reforming schools during a profound social and economic transition at the turn of the 21st century. The book is an English translation of Ye's (2015) *Return and Breakthrough: The Outline of Life-Practice Pedagogics* (《回归突破: "生命·实践"教育学论纲》). In the book Ye expounds the school of Life-Practice pedagogics in terms of its origin and development, its disciplinary position, its distinctive perspective on what education is, and its contemporary state-of-the-art interpretation of the core of Chinese educational traditions.

The initial stage of developing Life-Practice pedagogics involves intense reflection and revisiting of the pedagogic tradition (教育学传统) and other theoretical sources that had impacted the development of educational theory and practice in China. The pedagogic tradition was first introduced to China in the early-1900s via Japan, by way of translated Japanese texts on Herbart's and Herbartian theories. Later, the pedagogic theories of Pestalozzi, Montessori, and others, introduced to China from Continental Europe, exerted an impact on Chinese pedagogical thinking and practice (see Curran, 2005). After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it was Soviet pedagogic theories borrowed from the former Soviet Union (whose ultimate origins were European) that had the most fundamental impact on the tradition of Chinese pedagogics. Kairov's pedagogics (凯洛夫教育学), with Marxism as the sole methodological basis, became the "standard paradigm" (Deng, 2013, 2016).

However, in the English-translated version of the book the term "Life-Practice pedagogics" is translated as "Life-Practice educology" as noted above. Throughout the version, "pedagogics" is systematically replaced by "educology." As a result, Johann Herbart is referred to as the "father

of educology” and *Allgemeine Pädagogik* as the “foundational work of educology.” The choice of the word is very unfortunate because *educology*, by definition, refers to a kind of educational theory or theory of education that, developed by American educationists (e.g., Christensen, n.d; Frick, n.d.), is virtually unknown to the mainstream educational community. Overall, the translator does not seem to be aware that the work of Ye and her colleagues is built upon the *pedagogic tradition* in China which, with its origin in continental Europe, is fundamentally different from the traditions of educational theory and discourse in Anglo-American countries.

The mistranslation reflects a tendency among educational scholars in China to interpret Chinese educational theory and discourse in terms of Anglophone theoretical constructs—that is, to *anglicize* Chinese educational theory and discourse. For example, in a review of the development of educational theory and research in China, Wen and Xie (2017) use *educational studies*, a distinctive English construct, to characterize and encompass all sorts of educational theory and discourse imported from America, England, Germany, and the former Soviet Union. They do not seem to be aware of the existence of a continental tradition of educational thinking and theorizing that is fundamentally different from the English tradition of educational studies. In a recent article, Fu (2020) provides a critical analysis of the famous debate between Cesan Wang (王策三) and Qiquan Zhong (钟启泉)—the Wang–Zhong debate—concerning the curriculum reform in China at the turn of the 21st century. He frames the debate as “knowledge-based education” versus “student-centered education”—two popular terms in the English educational nomenclature. What is lacking is an awareness of *curriculum theory* and *didactics* underlying the debate—two traditions imported to China over the 20th century, from America and Europe, respectively (see Deng, 2016). Without an understanding of the continental tradition, I argue, educationalists would not be able to adequately understand the development of educational theory and discourse in China, let alone share the “Chinese story” about educational theory and practice with a global audience in a meaningful and intelligent way.

This paper provides an interpretation of the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics by locating the work of Ye and her colleagues within the tradition of pedagogics and within the context of China’s social and economic transition in which Life-Practice pedagogics was conceived. To clarify what the pedagogics tradition entails, I will first examine what the continental *Pädagogik* tradition (欧洲教育学传统) is and how it differs from the Anglophone tradition of educational studies. I will next show that Life-Practice pedagogics is squarely in the tradition of *Pädagogik* and exhibits a way of thinking and theorizing which is distinctively educational. Afterward, I will argue that Life-Practice pedagogics is also a distinctive Chinese construction by situating it within the context of New Basic Education and by linking it to Chinese educational traditions. The article concludes by addressing the international and national significance of Life-Practice pedagogics.

Educational studies, *Pädagogik* and education as a distinctive discipline

In *Knowledge and the study of education*, Furlong and Whitty (2017) identify several broad “knowledge traditions” in the study of education around the world, marked by a variety of terms in different languages that define the field of education in different ways. Chief among these are the Anglo-American “disciplines of education” and the continental “education as a discipline”—two traditions that have been particularly influential around the world. The former, also called the “educational studies” tradition in the UK, regards education *not* as a discipline *but* as an applied field that draws on theoretical and methodological inputs from multiple disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and history of education (Biesta 2011; Furlong & Whitty, 2017). In this tradition, there are literally *no* distinctively “educational” ways of thinking and theorizing—*but* sociological, psychological, philosophical, or historical ways (Biesta, 2011). As stated by Tibble (1971) in a book called *An introduction to the study of education*,

It is clear that ‘education’ is a field subject, not a basic discipline; there is no distinctively ‘educational’ way of thinking; in studying education one is using psychological or historical or sociological or philosophical ways of thinking to throw light on some problem in the field of human learning. (p. 16)

Unlike the educational studies tradition, the second tradition, largely embraced in Germany and other German-speaking countries, holds that education is an academic discipline in its own right. Named *Pädagogik* in German, this tradition traces its origin to Johann Amos Comenius, Johann Friedrich Herbart, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, among others (Biesta, 2011; Hopmann, 2007). As an autonomous discipline, *Pädagogik* has “its own terminology, its own points of departure, its own methods of investigation” (Krüger, 2008, p. 216). Herbart (1893) stated:

It would be better if the science of education [*Pädagogik*] remained as true as possible to its intrinsic conceptions and cultivated more an independent mode of thought, by which it would become the center of a sphere of exploration, and be no longer exposed to the danger of government by a stronger as a remote tributary province. (p. 83)

The “intrinsic conceptions” and “independent mode of thought” in this passage allude to a distinctively educational way of thinking and theorizing, which can be characterized by *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and “the dignity of practice”—three concepts which cannot be found in the Anglo-American literature.

With different emphases, *Erziehung* and *Bildung* are used to convey *what education is*—the very object of *Pädagogik*. *Erziehung* is meant to refer to activities, interactions or practice “in which teachers and other educators aim to influence the learning and formation processes of young people” (Benner, 2017, p. 266). Behind this concept is the basic idea that “certain

influences bring about certain effects” (Biesta, 2011, p. 184). *Erziehung* performs both a formative and a social function; it encompasses “on the one hand, any help towards the process of becoming a human being...and, on the other hand, any help towards becoming part of the life of society” (p. 184).

Bildung refers to the formation of the individual through the cultivation of human cognitive, moral, aesthetic, and practical powers and dispositions such as self-awareness, sensibility, autonomy, and dignity (Lüth, 2000; von Humboldt, 2000; also Hopmann, 2007). It is particularly concerned with the cultivation of capabilities for self-determination, co-determination and the dispositions of freedom and responsibility (Klafki, 2000)—a process which is vital to the formation of the individuals to become independent and responsible human beings (Klafki, 1998). *Bildung* is achieved through interactions of an individual with the world (Humboldt, 2000; also Hopmann, 2007).

When *Bildung* is taken as the central aim of education, *Erziehung* takes a distinctive form of educational practice oriented toward directing, encouraging, and supporting students in their self-formation processes (Biesta, 2011, 2021). A challenge for *Pädagogik*, then, is to explain how *Bildung* and *Erziehung* are related (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017)—an important issue to which, as will be shown, Ye has made a contribution.

The third concept holds that practice has unique “dignity”; it determines that theories from external sources are of a “subordinate” nature, only used in the service of developing pedagogic theory (Künzli, 2013). The role of theory is “to penetrate, explain and articulate alternative paths to take” (Gundem, 2000, p. 257). In schools, relating theory to practice is a task taken up by teachers through allowing their perspectives, way of thinking, and consciousness to be broadened, enhanced, and transformed by theory (Van der Stoep & Louw, 2005).

Life-Practice pedagogics and the *Pädagogik* tradition

I now turn to show that the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics is squarely in the tradition of *Pädagogik*. Underlying the construction is a way of thinking and theorizing that is distinctively educational. All the three concepts, *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and the idea of the dignity of practice, find manifestations in Ye’s writings.

Like *Pädagogik*, Life-Practice pedagogics is positioned as an autonomous, independent discipline in its own right. It is a discipline of practice and for practice, with a central concern for the meaningful growth and development of the life, spirit, and potential of individuals (Ye, 2009b). Underneath Life-Practice pedagogics lies a way of thinking and theorizing resembling the one that is inherent in *Pädagogik*: Theorizing does not begin with “‘other’ disciplines and their perspectives on education,” but with a substantive engagement with the fundamental question of

what education is and with theorizing its functions and core activities (Biesta, 2011, p. 184). According to Ye, the construction of pedagogics as a discipline must be grounded in, and start with, a well-informed and original understanding of its research subject—education. To tackle the question “What is education?,” she conducted a systematic review of multiple definitions of education in the literature and examined the thinking of several seminal figures (Comenius, Rousseau, Kant, Herbart, and Dewey, among others) in the Western history of education. The review and examination yielded an “internal” definition that, akin to *Erziehung*, construes education as “social activities that directly and consciously aim at influencing the intellectual, moral, psychological and physical development of individuals” (Ye, 2015, p. 182). This “stipulative” definition encapsulates the “soul” of education and its rich manifestations.

With this definition as a starting point, Ye (2015, 2020) argues that education performs an *internal function* because it directly influences the multifaceted development of individuals. It performs an *external function* as well because, by way of developing individuals, education indirectly contributes to the political, cultural, and economic development of society. These two functions of education are, according to Ye, achieved through the formation of the individual as a human subject—or, in *Pädagogik*’s terms, through *Bildung* as individual formation (Benner, 2017). She stresses the formation of the individual who has cultivated *life-awareness*—a notion that will be explained below—through practice or interaction with the world. Such a formation provides an “ultimate” answer to the question of what education is for—and thus constitutes the central goal of education.

The two notions—education as purposeful activities (*Erziehung*) and education as individual formation (*Bildung*)—together call for a special form of practice—that is, *Life-Practice*—centered on the value of life and the development of life-awareness. “The theoretical origin and heart of her ideas,” as Connelly (2020) rightly observed, “is life-practice, that is, life in all its potential connected to practice not only in schools but in life more generally” (p. xi). This conception of practice, which will be further elaborated below, constitutes the focus and an essential starting point for the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics.

With respect to the concept of the dignity of practice, Ye believes that practice provides an indispensable starting point for pedagogical inquiry and theorizing. The focus of pedagogics is to expound and elaborate the “reasons” and “logics” of practice (as both individual formation and social activities or practice), rather than to borrow perspectives from “other” disciplines. As with *Pädagogik*, she conceives the task of relating theory to practice as interpretive or hermeneutic. Theory “was somewhat like an ‘X-ray’, which made it possible to see and understand practice” (Hayhoe, 2006, p. 355). Theory allows one to reflect on practice and thus to improve the self-consciousness of practice. To change the practice of an individual teacher, there must be a transformation of “theories” in the mind of the practitioner (Ye, 2015).

Life-Practice pedagogics as a distinctive Chinese construction

While rooted in the tradition of *Pädagogik*, Life-Practice pedagogics is a distinctive Chinese construction. It is constructed over the course of implementing New Basic Education as a response to China's radical social and economic transition at the turn of the 21st century. It entails a contemporary interpretation of the Chinese educational ideal—"Teaching Knowledge on Heaven, Earth, and Human affairs, Cultivating Life-Awareness" (教天地人事, 育生命自觉)—in which the two concepts of education as individual formation (*Bildung*) and as purposeful activities or practice (*Erziehung*) find a distinctive Chinese expression. Furthermore, the development of Life-Practice pedagogics entails a unique form of school-and-classroom-based research involving a collaboration between school practitioners and university researchers.

New basic education as a response to China's radical social and economic transition

The turn of the 21st century saw a radical social and economic transition in China caused by globalization, a fast-growing market economy, and the emergence of information technology (Ye, 2006). "[B]ult to serve industrialisation and mass production," the extant education system—directed to the transmission of knowledge and skills—was deemed irrelevant and in need of transformation. Schools were, Ye (1994) argues, expected to develop individuals "who can control their own destinies and search for their own directions in this changing world." And the society "needs to rely on such individuals to create the future" (p. 4). The pedagogic theory and practice at that time—which had been powerfully shaped by Kairov's theory of pedagogics (a Soviet form of Herbartian theory)—were obsolete and in need of reconstruction.

Envisioned as a response to the transition, New Basic Education was a whole-school reform program directed toward the development of active, self-aware individuals. It called for a transformation that encompassed not only school practices but also administrative structures, the quality of teachers, the quality of administrative personnel, and curriculum and instructional resources. Integral to New Basic Education was the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics—the essential theoretical underpinning that served to guide and inform practices (Bu et al., 2016).

In this context, Ye can be seen as working in the tradition of John Dewey who, over 120 years ago, reinvented schooling as a response to the "social evolution" accompanying the Industrial Revolution at the turn of the 20th century. As typified in his seminal *The School and Society*, Dewey (1900/1990) envisioned what he called "new education" and argued that it was "part and parcel of the whole social evolution" (p. 21). He further constructed a theory or philosophy of education that provided the theoretical underpinning for the new education. The "relationship between the school and [social] life," Ye (2020) indicates, was in essence an "old problem" raised by Dewey at the beginning of the last century. Yet this problem "was raised again today for various reasons" (p. 316). As with Dewey, she envisaged New Basic Education as a response to the social transition in the 21st century and developed Life-Practice pedagogics which could guide the realization of the new vision.

Teaching knowledge on Heaven, Earth, and Human affairs, Cultivating Life-Awareness

The construction of Life-Practice pedagogics is also informed by Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions. Based on a systematic study of the traditions, Ye (2015, 2020) came to conceive of the core of Chinese educational wisdom as encapsulated in the ancient ideal—“Teaching knowledge on Heaven, Earth, and Human affairs, Cultivating Life-Awareness”—and adopted it as the expression of what education is for Life-Practice pedagogics. Furthermore, she provided a contemporary, state-of-the-art interpretation of the ideal in which the above two concepts—education as individual formation (*Bildung*) and education as purposeful activities or practice (*Erziehung*)—find meaning and significance in the current context of China.

In Life-Practice pedagogics the central goal of education is the formation of the individual who can take the initiative, make choices, direct his or her own life, and control his or her own destiny. The formation is achieved through the “Cultivation of Life-Awareness,” that is, through the development of self-determination, self-selection, self-responsibility, and intellectual capabilities that allow the individual to transcend oneself and to achieve self-realization and self-perfection (Ye, 2015, 2020). Echoing *Bildung*, this vision of education goes beyond the neo-Confucian notion of self-cultivation in that it is not merely centered on the cultivation of self and virtues but on the formation of the individual who has the power to live an autonomous, responsible, and creative life. The “true social development” of China, Ye (2020) argues, calls for the full development of “qualified citizens” who “are full of personality and creativity, and are able to consciously and continuously make self-transcendence and keep inherently consistent with the contemporary society” (p. 455). The formation of such an individual constitutes the “ultimate goal” of education and is “the most acute and meaningful historic task that educational reform in contemporary China is to take” (p. 445).

This goal is achieved through “Teaching Knowledge on Heaven, Earth, and Human affairs,” that is, through the process of teaching school subjects derived from mathematics, natural sciences, geography, humanities and other disciplines or fields of human knowledge. It requires educational practice to be directed toward the development of life-awareness in and through the teaching of the contents of school subjects. This, in turn, requires the teacher to be able to understand and appreciate the “educational value” (育人价值) inherent in school subjects, starting from elementary school all the way through secondary school.

In elementary schools, school subjects like languages and arithmetic provide students with signs and symbols that allow them to gain access to the accumulated wealth of human wisdom and cultivate a basic level of life-awareness:

...understanding and skillful application of the signs and symbols in language and arithmetic provide students with a door to the accumulation of human civilization over thousands of years and with tools to navigate the world of symbols and signs. This is one of the great achievements of modern

education. Pupils are initiated into an enlightening process of contacting with the abstract world and learning to think with symbols and signs. They become enlightened in knowing as well as in wisdom. (Ye, 2015, p. 317; Ye, 2020, p. 453)

In middle and secondary schools, school subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry, geography, and history have immense educational value or potential for cultivating intellectual capabilities and a higher level of life-awareness. Such subjects allow students to develop:

individual layers of knowledge structure, ways and modes of thinking, abilities to comprehend, exchange, integrate, and apply symbols and signs; curiosity to explore unknown territories and creativity to identify, formulate and solve problems; capabilities to penetrate and think beyond time and space; capabilities to understand and collaborate with others and to deal with contradictions and conflicts; self-consciousness and abilities to feel, understand, and live harmoniously with the natural world; abilities to sense and appreciate various forms of beauty in life and to create joy and beauty; and ultimately, self-confidence and belief in their own personalities and characters, their life-awareness, and their capabilities to plan and make decisions in real life situations. (Ye, 2015, p. 323; Ye, 2020, pp. 461–462)

In this regard, education as purposeful activities or practice (*Erziehung*) calls for classroom work of a different order. Rather than merely transmitting knowledge content, classroom teachers are centrally concerned with the cultivation of students' life-awareness and their intellectual and moral capabilities using content as a powerful educational resource. For each of the school subjects in the curriculum, they necessarily analyze and explore the educational value inherent in the content. Furthermore, they necessarily design pedagogical interactions in a way that can direct, encourage, and support the engagement of students in the educative process of self-formation (Ye, 2002, 2009b).

In this context, education as purposeful activities or practice (*Erziehung*) takes on a new meaning. Classroom teaching is an important phase of the "life journey" for both the teacher and students and can have an impact on their current and future life. It is not only a way of contributing to the development of students, but also an arena where teachers realize their life value, self-development, and self-fulfillment (Ye, 1997). New Basic Education calls for the full involvement and engagement of teachers, with a full grasp and understanding of school subjects as a powerful educational resource, committed to bringing about a lasting impact on the intellectual and spiritual life of students (Ye, 1999, 2000).

A distinctive form of collaborative school-based research

The development of Life-Practice pedagogics is informed and supported by carrying out a new form of research involving a collaboration between school practitioners and university researchers. Ye (2020) wrote,

We conducted innovation research on school reform side by side with educational practitioners in the school who were willing to participate in the reform experiments. While we were attempting to change existing school education, we were also exploring the possibility of creating new types of schools. (p. 19)

This form of research requires a close collaboration between “theoretical researchers” (university professionals) and “practical researchers” (school practitioners), with the former playing an active and “deeply intervening” role (Ye, 2009a). In schools, university professionals not only develop a firsthand understanding of issues and problems confronting practice, but also, through collaborating with school practitioners, actively participate in planning and implementing ways of reforming practice (Ye, 2009a).

Underpinning this form of collaborative research is a unique way of relating theory to practice. As university professionals and school practitioners examine complex issues and problems together, they reconstruct theory and practice together. University professionals facilitate a “mutual transformation and reciprocal generation” of theory and practice which is characterized by “a dynamic process of interdependence, interweaving, gestating, clashing, creating, and constructing links between theory and practice” (Ye, 2009a, p. 593). Furthermore, they together transform theory into “the facilities and structure of the school, its administration principles and organizational structure, its teaching plans and syllabus, and into any other practices relating to school education” (Ye, 1999, p. 164, cited in Ye, 2009a, p. 595). This conception of theory-practice relationship, Cheng (2018) observed, is markedly different from the model of “theory into practice” (translating external theory into classroom use) or “theory in practice” (unitizing teachers’ own theory of practice) in the Anglo-American literature.

However, like any theory or discipline, Life-Practice pedagogics is not free of issues or limitations. One issue would be how the cultivation of life-awareness contributes to the development of so-called 21st century competences such as collaboration, communication, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and ICT (Information and communication technology) literacy. Another issue, related to the preceding one, would be how the teaching of school subjects like arithmetic, languages, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and history—which are rather traditional, academic, or “singular” (Bernstein, 1971)—allows students to develop 21st century competences. Or, to put it differently, is there a need to reformulate school subjects by way of, for example, an issues-driven, integrated approach which requires students to draw upon perspectives and understanding from multiple school subjects to explore contemporary real-world issues (see Deng, 2009)? A third issue would be how teachers would work with existing national curriculum standards and guidelines in a way that not only contributes to the cultivation of life-awareness but also allows students to excel in high-stakes examinations (*zhongkao*, *gaokao*). There would be, of course, other issues as well. Nevertheless, issues like these are beyond the scope of this paper and are better to be discussed on other occasions.

Discussion

As Connelly indicated in the foreword of the English translated version of *Return and Breakthrough* (回归与突破), “this book will be extraordinary, perhaps revolutionary with respect to [English readers] predispositions about China and Chinese education” (Ye, 2020, p. vii). He implored readers to read the work of Ye with understanding and appreciation by attending to the “ways of thinking and doing of the leading practitioners of the topic being learned” (p. v.ii). This article seeks to render the “ways of thinking and doing” of Ye and her colleagues visible. I have shown that underlying the work of Ye is a way of thinking and theorizing that is distinctively educational—in terms of education as individual formation, education as purposeful activities or practice, and the dignity of practice. I have further shown that this way of thinking and theorizing lies itself within the continental *Pädagogik* tradition. Furthermore, I have argued that Life-Practice pedagogics is also a distinctive Chinese construction because it is grounded in the reality of Chinese schools and classrooms, informed by Chinese educational traditions, and has developed its own distinctive research methodology. In closing I want to argue that the work of Ye goes beyond broadening and challenging the Western understanding of Chinese education (as stressed by Connelly) and carries immense international and national significance.

As indicated earlier, education in Anglo-American countries is construed as a field of study relying on inputs from foundation disciplines (the psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy of education) and related sources. However, such a field has been under attack for its tendency to be disconnected from the professional knowledge of teachers and its dubious value or contribution to educational practice (Furlong & Whitty, 2017; Hordern et al., 2021). Recently, notably in England, there has been an attempt to promote education as an academic discipline by boosting the quality of research that focuses on educational practices and by highlighting the “positive impact” of educational research (Wyse, 2020; Wyse et al., 2021). What is absent, however, is a distinctively educational way of thinking and theorizing about practice as exemplified in the *Pädagogik* tradition which, Biesta (2011) argues, provides a possible response to the problems facing the education field. Likewise, education in Germany and other German-speaking countries is established as a distinctive discipline, *Pädagogik*, in its own right, with its own ways of thinking and theorizing that are not generated through “other” academic disciplines. However, today *Pädagogik* has been under attack for, among other things, its lack of an empirical research basis and its inability to respond to the poor performance of German students in international comparative studies such as PISA. It has been increasingly substituted, if not replaced, by the modern science of education (*Erziehungswissenschaft*), empirical studies on education (*Bildungsforschung*), educational psychology, and subject-matter *Didaktik* (Terhart, 2017; Vollmer, 2021). Recently, there have been attempts to revive *Pädagogik* by reasserting the autonomy of education as a discipline (Saeverot,

2021; Siegel & Matthes, 2022). Yet such attempts are mostly theoretical and philosophical exercises, without an engagement with practice or with the reality of schools and classrooms.

In this context, the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics has a profound international significance. It provides a powerful case of how education can be established as a distinctive discipline in the 21st century, with its distinctive educational form of thinking and theorizing, in response to the challenges and expectations of our times. It attests to the value and contribution of educational theory to the improvement of practice. The construction of Life-Practice pedagogics goes far beyond philosophical speculation and armchair theorizing. It entails an extensive and sustained involvement and engagement with the reality of schools and classrooms and is grounded in school-and-classroom-based research involving collaboration between school practitioners and university researchers.

Needless to say, Ye's work also carries enormous significance in China, not least with respect to revitalizing pedagogics as a distinctive discipline in the current context. Since the reopening of China to the world (1977–), there has been an influx of a variety of Western educational theories and discourse into the country, particularly from the US and the UK. The discipline of pedagogics was pronounced “dead” by Gang Wu (吴刚) in his provocative and controversial article “On the end of pedagogics” (《论教育学的终结》) (Wu, 1995). More and more educationists, particularly the younger generations, have turned to embrace the Anglo-American tradition of education as a multidisciplinary applied field and hold it as if it were the sole paradigm in the study of education. While pedagogics has remained as a school of thought in China, its theory and practice are in crisis due to a lack of concern for person-making in terms of individual formation (Deng, 2013), being disconnected from Chinese educational traditions, and being incapable of responding to the expectations and challenges of today's world (Ye, 2015). Over the years, Chinese educationists have lost confidence and capability to defend the discipline, let alone revitalize it in present times.

In this context, the development of Life-Practice pedagogics by Ye and her colleagues is unprecedented and extraordinary. It makes a compelling case of how pedagogics as a discipline can be revitalized in China to meet the demands and expectations of the times (Ye, 2006). It reconnects pedagogic theory and practice with the core of education—the formation of the individual as a human subject—and the teaching of content knowledge with the cultivation of students' intellectual and moral dispositions and powers (Ye, 2020). Furthermore, the construction of Life-Practice pedagogics is rooted in “the rich spiritual home of China” (Chinese educational traditions) and informed by Western educational and philosophical traditions and discourse (Ye, 2015, 2020). In this sense, Ye and her colleagues continue the important project undertaken by several distinguished Chinese educationists such as Yangchu Yan (晏阳初), Xingzhi Tao (陶行知), and Shuming Liang (梁漱溟) over the last century—constructing Chinese educational theory rooted in the reality of China and

nourished by both Chinese and Western educational traditions (Hayhoe, 2006). Cheng's (2018) commentary is worth quoting:

Like many Chinese educationalists, Ye usually thinks of educational issues in the specific context of contemporary China, which has been undergoing a profound economical and socio-cultural transformation. In this context Ye has struggled to find a solid foundation for pedagogics as an independent discipline, identify education as a practice with life, better modern schools in terms of their educativeness, and, last but not least, to construct a school of Chinese pedagogics in dialogue with the great minds from Ancient China and the West as well as practitioners in education and schooling. (p. 353)

I now turn to the last, but not least, significance of Ye's work. I hope I have made clear that underpinning Life-Practice pedagogics is a way of thinking and theorizing which is distinctively educational, predicated on sustained engagement with the fundamental question of what education is. Nowadays, this fundamental question has virtually disappeared from educational discourse which has been dominated by a language of learning (Biesta, 2005) and inundated with a variety of fads or slogans. As with what has been happening around the world, in China there has been what Biesta (2009) calls a "learnification" of educational discourse—a global shift toward talking about learning, rather than education and teaching. Learning is a process term that says very little about purpose, direction, and relationship in education. Accompanying this shift is an enthusiastic, unquestioning embrace of a variety of fads—blended learning, flipped classrooms, disruptive innovations, Artificial Intelligence, and so forth. In this regard, Ye's (2015) observation is rather perceptive and timely:

...current discourse involves a departure from the education arena and a move into other domains: from education to learning, and from learning to entertainment or others. In the reality of schooling there are often people who advocate learning to replace teaching, and teaching to replace education. Such a discourse and advocacy are attributable to the influence of Western educational theory and discourse, and to a misunderstanding or misinterpretation of educational reality or the confusion of teaching with learning, and education with teaching. Such a misunderstanding and confusions would prevent us from realizing the full value and function of education. (pp. 178–179)

Learnification and the proliferation of educational fads have distracted away from the incredibly important question of what education is. To render the educational way of thinking and theorizing underlying Life-Practice pedagogics visible, then, is a call to rediscover the essence of education—its functions or purposes and practice. Education cannot be reduced to learning, nor can it be equated with trendy and fashionable pedagogical innovations and techniques. As purposeful activities or practice, education performs an internal function—directly influencing the multifaceted development of the individual—and an external function—indirectly influencing the multifaceted

development of a society, social, economic, and cultural (Ye, 2015, p. 181). In other words, education is a deliberative, purposeful human enterprise that contributes to individual development, human flourishing, economic prosperity, cultural continuity, and social progress (Deng, 2020). At the heart of this enterprise is the formation of human subjects to become autonomous and independent individuals with fully developed capabilities, capable of leading their own life, making their own choices, and taking individual and social responsibility. It is time to reclaim what is lost in the current educational discourse—the essence of education. For this, there is no better work in China than what has been written by Lan Ye, not least her *Return and Breakthrough: The Outline of Life-Practice Pedagogics*.


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ORCID iD

Zongyi Deng  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8068-382X>

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