

# The “Why” and “What” of Curriculum Inquiry: Schwab’s *The Practical* Revisited

Zongyi DENG

*National Institute of Education  
Nanyang Technological University*

*This article examines the “why” and “what” of curriculum inquiry from the perspective of the practical in Schwab’s (1969/1978a) paper. It critically scrutinizes the state of curriculum inquiry in China and in North America. The central argument is that curriculum inquiry is a practical undertaking centrally concerned with the practice or inner work of schooling within the societal, institutional and instructional contexts. It is a normative endeavor for its ultimate purpose is the advancement of schooling. Furthermore, this article addresses what makes curriculum inquiry curricular, and challenges contemporary curriculum theorizing (e.g., reconceptualist curriculum inquiry) as peripheral to or decoupled from the real-world practice of schooling.*

*Keywords: curriculum inquiry; curriculum theory; the practical; curriculum practice*

What is curriculum inquiry for? What is the nature of curriculum inquiry? What makes curriculum inquiry *curricular*? This article<sup>1</sup> addresses these questions through revisiting the idea of *the practical* articulated by Joseph Schwab in his first “practical” paper (Schwab, 1969/1978a). This article critically scrutinizes the state of curriculum inquiry in China and in North America.

In the first “practical” paper, Schwab (1969/1978a) identified the *symptoms* of crisis in the curriculum field in the United States (U.S.) in the 1960s and 1970s, pronouncing that “The field of curriculum is moribund” (p. 287); “It is unable, by its present methods and principles, to continue its work and contribute significantly to the advancement of education” (p. 287). He offered a *diagnosis* of the crisis by making a theoretic-practical distinction, pointing out that “The field of curriculum has reached this unhappy state by inveterate, unexamined, and mistaken reliance on *theory*” (p. 287). Finally, he provided a

*prescription* — that is, the practical — that could cure the crisis in the curriculum field: “... only if curriculum energies are in large part diverted from theoretic pursuits ... to three other modes of operation ... the *practical*, the *quasi-practical*, and the *eclectic*” (p. 287).

Inspired by what Schwab (1969/1978a) did in his first “practical” paper, in this article I start with discussing the current state of curriculum inquiry in China, and then compare and contrast between the *theoretic* and *practical* modes of curriculum inquiry to diagnose the current problems inherent in curriculum studies in the U.S. and in China. Based on Schwab’s idea of the practical, I discuss what curriculum inquiry as a practical undertaking entails — an approach to curriculum research that can resolve those problems. Two examples are used for illustration. Furthermore, the article addresses what makes curriculum inquiry *curricular*, and challenges contemporary curriculum theorizing or reconceptualist curriculum studies that treat curriculum inquiry as a theoretic undertaking external or peripheral to the real-world practice of schooling.

## **The Current State of Curriculum Inquiry**

In describing the moribund state of curriculum inquiry, Schwab (1969/1978a) identified the symptoms of crisis in terms of six flights:

1. *Flight of the field* — a “translocation” of curriculum problems and solutions from curriculum specialist to experts of other fields or disciplines such as economics and politics;
2. *Flight upward* — a flight from discourse about curriculum to discourses about discourse or talk about talk about curriculum;
3. *Flight downward* — a return to “the subject matter in a state of innocence, shorn not only of current principles but of all principles” (p. 301);
4. *Flight to the sideline* — a retreat of curriculum specialists to “the role of observer, commentator, historian, and critic of contribution of others to the field” (p. 301);
5. *Flight to perseveration* — “a repetition of old and familiar knowledge in new language” (p. 301);
6. *Flight to hot, caustic debates* — “rise in frequency and intensity of the eristic, contentious, ad hominem debates” (p. 302).

All the flights except the third one can be seen in the curriculum field in China. With regard to the first flight, unlike in the U.S. where curriculum issues and solutions at the policy level have been largely transferred to and handled by politicians and corporate

business leaders, curriculum scholars in China play an important role in curriculum policymaking and implementation.<sup>2</sup> However, the evidence of a flight of the field exists. In China, curriculum scholars have long been interested in borrowing theories and models from other disciplines — such as philosophy (in particular Marxism), politics and psychology — for the discussion of curriculum issues and solutions. In the late 20th century, *cybernetics*, *systems theory*, and *information theory* constituted the so-called “three basic theories” employed for constructing theories of curriculum and instruction (see Cha, 1986; Qiao, 1985). The beginning of the 21st century saw many scholars argue that Marxist theory of dialectical materialism remains as the theoretical foundation for the current curriculum reform in China (e.g., Jin & Ai, 2005; C. S. Wang, 2004). This seems to suggest that, at least at the theoretical level, what ought to be done about curriculum is the business of some other experts, be they philosophers, politicians or psychologists. Curriculum or educational scholars mainly work from a theoretical framework or model — philosophical, political or psychological — to deduce or formulate concepts and principles pertaining to instructional processes (Liu & Lin, 2008; Yu, 2009).

Over the last two decades, the first flight seems to have been replaced by the second flight. There are indicators of a flight upward, as a variety of contemporary theory and discourse — including complexity theory, post-structuralism, post-modernism, and so forth — has become increasingly popular among many curriculum scholars in China. Following the reconceptualist movement in American curriculum studies, Chinese curriculum scholars have actively borrowed and employed those theories and discourses to discuss curriculum issues and phenomena in China (see H. Zhang & Zhong, 2003; W. J. Zhang, 1997). In the words of Schwab (1969/1978a), there exists a tendency toward an “exploitation of the exotic and fashionable among forms and models of theory and metatheory” (p. 303) rather than an understanding of specific issues and problems facing real curriculum practice in schools or classrooms.

Associated with the first two flights are the fourth flight (to the sideline), the evidence of which can be seen in the proliferation of commentaries, criticisms, policy explanations, and personal reflections in academic literature written by curriculum scholars. This is indeed a general pattern in the entire academic field of education in China (see Cheng, 1991; Yang, 2005). Recently, Zhao et al. (2008) examined one leading research journal in China, *Educational Research*, to understand the nature of educational research in China. It was shown that the majority of papers are so-called “conceptual papers,” including philosophical discussions, personal opinions, and policy explanations. In general, curriculum scholars

have a strong tendency to take on the role of an observer, a commentator, or a critic rather than to be engaged in real practical curriculum work.

There are also indicators of the fifth flight (to perseveration). Curriculum principles or models like the Tyler rationale and the Bloom's taxonomy are continuously restated in journal articles (e.g., Guo & Rao, 2006) and curriculum texts (see Huang, 2006; Zhong & Zhang, 1999). In the didactics (教學論) circle, scholars have long been engaged in restating and reinterpreting two basic concepts of "teaching" and "teaching process" from different perspectives and with different emphases (see Yu, 2009). Those restatements and reinterpretations, in the words of Schwab (1969/1978a), "add little or nothing to the old meanings embodied in the older and more familiar language" (p. 301). They tend to keep curriculum scholars further away from actual school/classroom practices (Yu, 2009).

The sixth flight can be seen in some heated academic debates characterized by competing, incommensurable paradigms or traditions. This is exemplified in the famous debate over the theoretical base of the new curriculum reform between Zhong Qiquan and Wang Cesan and between their disciples (see C. S. Wang, 2008; Zhong & You, 2004), as well as the academic dispute over the relationship between curriculum theory (課程論) and didactics (see Huang, 2000; B. L. Wang, 2006). No signs of reconciliation or rapprochement have been seen so far.

The evidences of these signs together indicate that the field of curriculum studies in China is in a state of crisis. Curriculum inquiry in particular (and educational research in general) is currently under strong criticism; it has been attacked for its tendency to separate theory from practice and from the reality of school and classroom (Li & Zhao, 2009; Liu & Lin, 2008; Yu, 2009). It does not seem to have contributed significantly to the advancement and improvement of curriculum practices in China. What could be the root cause? What could be the alternative that can lead curriculum inquiry in China out of the crisis? In his first "practical" paper, Schwab (1969/1978a) presented a diagnosis and a prescription which, while aiming at the curriculum field in the 1960s and 1970s, hold true about the curriculum field in the U.S. today (Connelly, 2009; Westbury, 2007). Schwab's diagnosis and prescription, as will be shown, is helpful for understanding the current crisis in the curriculum field in China and for coming up with a meaningful resolution.

### ***The Theoretic and the Practical***

To provide the diagnosis and prescription, Schwab (1969/1978a) compared and

contrasted between the theoretic and practical modes of curriculum inquiry in terms of outcomes, subject matter, problem source, and methods.

According to Schwab (1969/1978a), the end product of the theoretic is theoretical knowledge which is general, universal and lasting. On the other hand, the outcome of the practical is specific decisions that are provincial and temporary. In terms of subject matter, the theoretic deals with concepts and abstract representations that are “constant from instance to instance and impervious to changing circumstance” (p. 289), for example, atoms, electrons and protons, class, etc. By contrast, the practical works with specific and concrete cases which are “susceptible to circumstance” and therefore “liable to unexpected change” (p. 289). It is concerned with “this student, in that school, on South Side of Columbus, with Principal Jones during the present mayoralty of Ed Tweed and in view of the probability of his reelection” (p. 289). The theoretic investigates problems arising from states of mind — areas which are defined by our existing knowledge, and which are not yet understood. The practical, on the other hand, addresses problems arising from states of affair — certain social situations or conditions that we believe can be otherwise or need to be improved. Furthermore, the methods of the theoretic are theory-driven, controlled by a guiding principle that determines and shapes problem formulation, data collection and interpretation, conclusion development. By contrast, the methods of the practical are context/situation-driven, enabled by deliberate methods characterized by “the interplay of ends and means, of problem, data, and solution” (p. 290). The comparisons are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparisons Between the Theoretic and the Practical Modes of Inquiry**

	Theoretic (mathematics, natural sciences, and metaphysics)	Practical (political sciences and ethics)
Outcome (final cause)	Theoretical knowledge: generalizable and durable	A decision: temporary and provisional
Subject matter (material cause)	Concepts and abstract representations: universal, constant, impervious to changing circumstance	Specific and concrete cases: susceptible to circumstance, liable to unexpected changes
Problem source (formal cause)	State of mind: something unknown	State of affair: unfulfilled needs or desires
Methods (efficient cause)	Principle-driven, inductive and deductive method	Situation-driven, searching for problems and solutions, ends-means interplay

It is important to point out that in making the theoretic-practical distinction, Schwab (1969/1978a) invoked Aristotelian distinction of different kinds of disciplines. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguished among *theoretic* disciplines (e.g., mathematics, natural sciences, and metaphysics), *practical* disciplines (e.g., political sciences and ethics), and *productive* disciplines (e.g., fine arts, the applied arts, and engineering). Furthermore, Schwab explicitly drew on the Aristotelian notion of four causes — i.e., the final, the material, the formal, and the efficient — with respect to outcome, subject matter, problem source, and methods (Westbury, 2009). In other words, the terms *practical* here has nothing to do with the common sense notion of *practice* or *action*. The practical here refers to a principled way of thinking about human action or practice in terms of decisions and choices in concrete circumstances — a theory that can be traced back to Aristotle.

Through making the theoretic-practical distinction, Schwab (1969/1978a) argued that curriculum inquiry is *not* a theoretical undertaking centered on understanding curricular phenomena through developing abstract theories and principles. The root problem of the U.S. curriculum field, according to Schwab, was that curriculum inquiry had been treated as theoretic rather than practical endeavor centrally concerned with human practice and related decision-making processes. Curriculum studies in the U.S. was “inveterately theoretic and its theoretic bent has let it down” (Schwab, 1969/1978a, p. 287). Westbury (2009) further elaborated Schwab’s diagnosis:

Curriculum, and educational research concerned with the curriculum, had framed and understood their task in terms of the theoretic, that is, in terms of knowing. In other words, the idea of action/practice is/was subordinated to knowledge/theory. Because of this, curriculum studies and education have not been able to connect centrally and directly with the world of action that is schooling, with the decisions and choices to be made about what might be taught and learned, and questions like what can be taught and learned in the institution of the school. (p. 5)

Schwab’s (1969/1978a) diagnosis, albeit made more than 40 years ago, can aptly apply to the contemporary field of curriculum studies in North America today. Wraga and Hlebowitsh (2003) revisited Schwab’s six signs against the body of curriculum scholarship engendered by the movement of reconceptualization. They observed that the contemporary curriculum field remains in a state of crisis very much like the one characterized by Schwab in terms of six flights. Westbury (2007) observed that forty years ago the field of curriculum studies in the U.S. made a “wrong turn” after the publication of Schwab’s paper.

Contemporary curriculum theorists have turned away from school practice and actual world of schooling to discourse analysis and to theoretical sources in the arts, humanities and social sciences. In a similar vein, Reid (2006) observed that in the contemporary curriculum field, the preoccupation with issues of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, and so forth tends to divert attention away from basic curriculum issues concerning curriculum as practice and as institution, making the very realities of curriculum invisible to researchers and policymakers. In an international conference on the practical, Connelly (2009) mused about the current status of curriculum studies in North America, saying that “if Joe Schwab thought there were flights from the field by curriculum scholars in the 1970s he would now think they had now been shot off into space in a rocket” (p. 104).

The diagnosis holds true about the curriculum field in China — a field which has been strongly influenced by American curriculum theory since its inception (see H. Zhang & Zhong, 2003). The current crisis in China’s curriculum studies has to do with the fact that curriculum studies has been largely treated as a theoretic undertaking concerned primarily with constructing general theories and principles of curriculum and instruction. As indicated earlier, many scholars have been engaged in the activity of borrowing theories from other disciplines and “deducing” right solutions from them for schools and classrooms. The preoccupation with such a task or activity has distanced curriculum scholars from school/classroom practice and from the institutional context of schooling where practice takes place (Liu & Lin, 2008; Yu, 2009).

I now turn to the prescription by Schwab (1969/1978a) in view of the current crisis in curriculum inquiry.

### **Curriculum Inquiry as a Practical Undertaking**

The prescription is the practical. Curriculum studies and, by implications, curriculum inquiry, are first and foremost as a “practical” field. Three propositions are essential. First, the field of curriculum studies is centrally concerned with practices with the intention to improve the work of schooling. It is, as put by Connelly and Xu (2012), a practical field or discipline “with actions of making and doing as ends” rather than a theoretical discipline “aimed at *knowledge* and *understanding*” (p. 117). This constitute the ultimate purpose or the “why” of doing curriculum research and inquiry.

Second, curriculum or curriculum practice is construed as inextricably embedded within the real-world context of a school or classroom rather than derived from abstract theories and principles:

[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 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. The same diversity holds with respect to teachers and what they do. (Schwab, 1969/1978a, pp. 309–310)

In other words, the unique state of affairs of a school or classroom provides the essential starting point and frame of reference for understanding and improving curriculum and curriculum practice.

Third, curriculum practice entails deliberate and reflective decision-making processes characterized by a dynamic and balanced consideration of the four curriculum commonplaces — teacher, students, subject matter and milieu (Schwab, 1973/1978b). This requires being able to relate theory to practice in a dialectic and eclectic way. Practice is not subordinate to theory; theory is employed to illumine and interpret practice. However, a single theory is incomplete and partial; therefore, researchers or practitioners need to employ various theories in combination “without paying the full prices of their incompleteness and partiality” (Schwab, 1969/1978a, p. 297). A variety of theories are brought to bear on for illumining, interpreting and enhancing practices in an *eclectic* manner (Schwab, 1969/1978a). This is essential to the development of new theories and principles.

In short, curriculum inquiry is a *practical* undertaking centrally concerned with curriculum practice or the (inner) work of schooling in context. It entails examining curriculum practice (e.g., classroom teaching and curriculum development) in terms of decision, choice, and deliberation in a particular classroom, school, or institutional context. This inquiry, Westbury (2009) points out, is animated by the mission of the advancement of schooling, which constitutes the primary purpose of curriculum research. Curriculum inquiry seeks to guide and inform concrete decision-making and course of action for school improvement.

In Western literature a vast body of curriculum research exists which is “practical” in spirit, although researchers do not explicitly cite or make reference to Schwab’s “practical” papers. Connelly and Xu (2010) characterized that body of literature in terms of a *practice-context-theory* nexus. In curriculum inquiry reflecting such a nexus, issues and problems concerning practice (policymaking, curriculum development, classroom teaching, etc.) are



taken as the starting point for theory development. And, practice is viewed as situated or embedded in the context of schooling — broadly conceived — which, in turn, provides an important “interpretive frame” for understanding issues and solutions. Furthermore, theory is drawn upon to help account for the practice in question, and thus assist in generating new theory.

In China, too, many curriculum inquiries are “practical” in the sense that inquiries or studies reflect the above practice-context-theory nexus and/or the three propositions of “practical” curriculum inquiry. In what follows, I will look at two examples of “practical” curriculum inquiry conducted by Chinese researchers.

## **Two Examples of “Practical” Curriculum Inquiry**

### ***Ye Lan’s University-School Collaborative Research***

University-school collaborative research was an approach developed by Ye Lan and her associates for their New Basic Education Research program, which was conceived within the context of rapid social and educational transitions in China in the 1990s. Its overriding aim was to reform elementary and secondary schooling for the 21st century. The specific goals of New Basic Education Research included: (a) transforming the lives of students and teachers, (b) the construction of a theory of school reform, and (c) the reconstruction of educational and pedagogical theories (Ye, 2009). The “practical” orientation is further reflected in the stated mission of their program. As Ye said in an interview, “the essential mission of the educational scholar is not talking about ideal education, but implementing this kind of education in a permanent way, which makes a real difference to the progress and development of the nation, and even the world” (Reporter, 2004).

The research aimed at transforming and improving classroom practice. It focused on examining the practical issue of how teachers could improve their practice within a particular setting of a school or classroom. This type of research featured an active involvement of university researchers in planning and implementing school/classroom-based research, with the collaboration of classroom teachers. Theory was brought to bear on the formulation of project aims and the translation of those aims into research plan and methodology. Data was collected through classroom observation and interviews with teachers. Through active involvement and collaboration with classroom teachers, university researchers developed new theories of reform and pedagogical practice. Likewise, teachers were engaged in the process of studying and “internalizing” theory, and making reflective

and deliberate decisions. The theory-practice relationship was construed in a dialectic manner: “When learning and thinking about theories become an indispensable part in teacher’s life, they can create their own theories in practice; they will transform from operations into reflective practitioners” (Ye, 2009, p. 40).

### ***Fang Yanping’s Study of the Role of Homework in Mathematics Teaching***

Fang (2010) examined an important yet under-theorized aspect of pedagogical practice concerning the mediating role of homework in classroom teaching. With a focus on the mathematics teaching of a middle school teacher in Shanghai, Fang formulated three research questions:

1. What kind of teaching and learning is entailed in and made possible by the homework activities?
2. How does the homework-driven teaching practice help us understand the curricular, societal and cultural expectations of the work of a mathematics teacher?
3. In what ways does this case study enable us to understand the nature of continued workplace learning in a Chinese school setting?

The aim of the study is *practical* in orientation. It seeks to improve pedagogical practice in classrooms through enhancing understanding of “the role of homework in teaching and learning and in the continuous professional development of teachers” (p. 614).

The study was conducted in a Shanghai’s middle school. It was highly contextualized, with a detailed and thorough description of what it was like to teach mathematics within the social, cultural, curricular and institutional context of schooling in Shanghai. Multiple sources of evidence were collected for the investigation, including observation, interviews, lesson videotapes, curriculum documents, and so forth. Furthermore, the work was highly theoretical; multiple theoretical perspectives on homework — identified from international literature, cognitive psychology, cultural-historic activity theory, and cultural pedagogy — were brought to bear on for analyzing homework-related practices and interpreting empirical evidence and findings. Fang (2010) showed how homework was used as a powerful “educative” resource for teaching and teacher learning. She developed a theory of “cultural pedagogy of errors” that can capitalize the educational potential of homework and raised important theoretical questions about classroom practice and ways of organizing teachers’ work in support of teacher learning.

These two examples foreground the importance of investigating problems and issues pertaining to practice within the cultural, institutional and instructional context of schooling in China. The investigation provides an essential starting point for a productive use of theory from external sources as well as for the development of theory that can speak directly to the particular problems and issues embedded in a particular school or classroom context. This “practical” view of curriculum or educational inquiry is echoed and supported by many scholars in China. The development of Chinese educational theory, Lu (2001) argues, entails the need to investigate educational problems in China and to study theories and models from other countries. The “indigenous knowledge” gained from the investigation of problems and issues needs to be used to frame the development of curricular and pedagogical theories in China, and to modify and transform “exotic” theories or models according to the situation and context of China. The discovery and study of local problems and issues concerning practice, according to Liu and Lin (2008), can enhance self-consciousness and local awareness, allowing “the emergence of new ways of thinking and new perspectives,” and make “initiation and originality possible” (p. 169). This approach, I believe, holds promise of overcoming the crisis in the curriculum inquiry in China.

### **What Makes Curriculum Inquiry *Curricular*?**

I now turn to the last issue: What makes curriculum inquiry *curricular*? One would say that curriculum inquiry is *inquiry into curriculum*, and therefore, it is the subject of curriculum that distinguishes curriculum inquiry from other kinds of inquiry like psychological and sociological inquiries. However, what is *curriculum*? In dictionaries and common usage, the term is relatively simple, referring to programs, courses of study, textbooks, syllabuses, etc. However, the term is rather complex and highly contentious in academic literature (see Jackson, 1992). There is multiplicity of possible definitions of curriculum; to name a few, it can refer to “experience,” “educational opportunities,” “currere,” and “cultural reconstruction.” Furthermore, there are a variety of approaches or methods, such as philosophical, historical, scientific, narrative, aesthetic, phenomenological, hermeneutic, theoretical, normative, critical, and evaluative, among others, all of which claim to constitute “forms of curriculum inquiry” (Short, 1991). The lack of consensus on the definitions and research methods of curriculum makes what should be counted as curriculum inquiry highly contestable: “Who is to tell us that what we are doing is not curriculum inquiry, when we don’t know what curriculum is?” and “Who can tell us we are

using the wrong methods, when there is no agreement about which ones are right?" (Reid, 1992, p. 165).

My way out of this confusion is found in Schwab's (1969/1978a) the practical. The starting point and essential frame of reference for thinking about curriculum and curriculum inquiry need to be an understanding of, and an appreciation for, *the work or practice of schooling in its immediate and surrounding context*. This can help sort out various types of curriculum inquiry and understand in what sense they are *curricular*.

Broadly construed, the work of schooling is embedded in three layers of context: the *societal* (social expectations, policies, and discourses concerning what schooling should be), the *institutional* (characterized by school types, programs, school subjects or courses of study, grade levels, assessment procedures, etc.), and the *instructional* (teacher-student interactions, classroom activities, discourses, methods of instruction, etc.). With reference to these three layers of content, three kinds of curriculum — the *ideal or abstract*, the *institutional*, and the *classroom* — can be identified.

1. The ideal or abstract curriculum defines the connection between schooling and society, embodying a conception of what schooling should be with respect to the society and culture. It "typifies" what is desirable in social and cultural orders, what is to be valued and sought after by members of a society or nation (Doyle, 1992a, 1992b).
2. The institutional curriculum translates the ideal or abstract curriculum into curriculum structures, programs, school subjects, or courses of study provided to schools or a system of schools (Doyle, 1992a, 1992b; Westbury, 2000). It takes the form of curriculum documents, syllabi, textbooks, and the like. The process of constructing a school subject or course of study entails the selection and arrangement of content (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) and the transformation of that content for school and classroom use (Doyle, 1992b).
3. The classroom curriculum refers to what is taught and learned in schools and classrooms, represented by a cluster of events jointly developed by a teacher and a group of students within a particular school or classroom (Doyle, 1992a, 1992b). Curriculum making at this level transforms the school subject or course of study embodied in curriculum materials into "educative" experiences for students. It requires further elaboration of the content of a school subject or course of study, making it connecting with the experience, interests, and capacities of students in a particular classroom (Westbury, 2000).

Notice that the term *classroom* is used in a broad sense, encompassing school-based curriculum development activities as well as those of individual classrooms. At the classroom level, it can also include the *achieved* curriculum, the curriculum student actually learned, and the *experienced* curriculum that students go through (Doyle, 2008).

Three broad categories of curriculum inquiry can be identified, under each of which are several distinct research programs. One category concerns the ideal and abstract curriculum. For example, what schooling is for with respect to society and culture? What knowledge is of most worth? How should teaching be conducted? These are normative, ideological questions that have been at the heart of debate among educational philosophers, curriculum theorists and policymakers. Addressing questions of this kind calls for philosophical, normative, historical, and ideological inquiries, among others. In curriculum literature, answers to these questions can be represented by an assemblage of curriculum conceptions or ideologies, such as *academic rationalism*, *social efficiency*, *humanism*, and *social reconstructionism* (cf. Schiro, 2008). These conceptions are “ideas about the curriculum rather than the practices of schooling” (Westbury, 2003, p. 531). Reconceptualist curriculum theorists have produced many discourses concerning the abstract or ideal curriculum (with an emphasis on the individual or culture) (cf. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995), each of which represents “a rhetorical form that seeks to stake out positions in the ideological space around the school” (Westbury, 2003, p. 534).

Another broad group of curriculum research centers on the institutional curriculum. One essential issue concerns the formation of a school subject, program, or course of study for a school or school system. This issue has been at the heart of traditional curriculum inquiry; many scholars had written about the technical and practical aspects of curriculum planning and development (e.g., Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1949). It has also been explored philosophically. There exists a body of literature analyzing the nature and structure of academic disciplines and specialized fields and drawing implications for constructing the institutional curriculum, such as in the form of a school subject (e.g., Hirst, 1974; Phenix, 1964). Furthermore, the formation of a school subject has been examined sociologically and socio-historically from a critical perspective. There are studies examining how the construction of a school subject intersects with the existing patterns of social structures, orders, and relations (e.g., Apple, 1979; Bernstein, 1971; Young, 1971). There is also a cohort of studies investigating how a school subject constitutes a socio-historical construction of a particular time (e.g., Goodson, 1998; Popkewitz, 1987).

The third big category of curriculum inquiry concerns the nature and character of curriculum making or pedagogical practice within the setting of a school or classroom. The researches of Ye Lan and Fang Yanping fall within this category. In addition, three lines of inquiry can be identified in literature. One line is represented by the work of Shulman and his colleagues examining how teachers interpret and transform their understanding of curriculum content in classrooms into “forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the student” (Shulman, 1987, p. 15; see also Wilson, Shulman, & Richert, 1987). Another line of research unpacks the image of teacher as curriculum maker through examining how teachers, in consideration of curriculum commonplaces, interpret and transform the written curriculum into learning experiences using his or her personal practical knowledge (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008). In relation to this, there exists a large body of literature that explores how teachers interpret and enact curriculum materials in classrooms in light of their beliefs, knowledge, narratives, or experiences (e.g., Remillard, 2005; Sherin & Drake, 2009). The third line of inquiry consists of the work of Doyle, Westbury, and others, which examines the nature of classroom curriculum within the institutional context of schooling, showing how teaching is a curriculum process (see Doyle, 2010).

What is common across these three broad categories is a concern about schooling and/or the work that schools do — whether at the societal, institutional, or school level. It is the focus on the work of schooling in context that gives curriculum inquiry a discernible identity. The three categories constitute the broad field of curriculum inquiry; however, they are *curricular* in differing ways. Inquiries under the first category fall within the domain of general curriculum theory/theorizing. They are *curricular* in the sense that they address or carry implications for the curriculum questions of the “what” and “why” of schooling with respect to society and culture. Under the second and third categories, there are large bodies of inquiries directly concerned with the making of curricula (i.e., planning, developing, and evaluating), the doing of curricula (i.e., teaching, enacting, or implementing), as well as the socio-political nature of such making or doing within the societal, institutional and instructional context of schooling. All these studies or inquiries are *curricular* because they are directly concerned with the real-world practice or inner work of schooling in its broad immediate and surrounding context. In view of this, general curriculum theory/theorizing (the first category) constitutes only a (small) part of the field of curriculum inquiry.

However, in the current North American curriculum literature, there is a strong tendency to “conflate general curriculum/curriculum theorizing with the broader field of

curriculum inquiry,” thus treating curriculum inquiry as theoretic undertaking peripheral to and/or decoupled from the real-world practice of schooling (Connelly & Xu, 2010, p. 326). This is also evident in China. As already mentioned, reconceptualist curriculum theory and discourse has become increasingly popular among many Chinese curriculum scholars. Such a tendency must be challenged for it serves to divert attention away from basic “practical” issues of curriculum as practice and as institution (Reid, 1992).

The above categorization is by no means comprehensive and exhaustive of the entire field of curriculum inquiry. Within each of the three categories, there are other programs or lines of curriculum inquiry that have not been included for discussion. In addition, there are other curriculum studies that do not fall nicely within the three categories. For example, Xu, Connelly, He, and Phillion (2007) examine issues of immigrant student’s experience from cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and international perspectives, with narrative inquiry as a powerful methodology. Their work is fundamentally *curricular* because students’ experience constitutes an essential curriculum commonplace in Schwab’s (1969/1978a) the practical, which has a direct bearing on the nature and work of schooling. In other words, the institutional and classroom curriculum do not exist in a vacuum; they are intertwined and interact with the social and cultural context in which schooling operates and functions.

## Concluding Remark

I have discussed what curriculum inquiry is for, what the nature of curriculum inquiry is, and what makes curriculum inquiry curricular through revisiting Schwab’s (1969/1978a) the “practical” paper. Schwab’s paper, albeit written over forty years ago, is still highly relevant today. It provides an indispensable ground for addressing fundamental questions about the nature of curriculum inquiry, as well as for sorting out confusions and debates over what should constitute curriculum inquiry.

The central argument of this article is that curriculum inquiry is a practical inquiry centrally concerned with the inner work or real-world practice of schooling within the societal, institutional and instructional context in which schools are situated and function. Furthermore, curriculum inquiry is a normative undertaking for its ultimate purpose is centered on the advancement of schooling. Whereas general curriculum theory/theorizing constitutes an important component in curriculum inquiry, there are vast bodies of curriculum literature directly concerned with the making and doing of curricula. Therefore, curriculum subject matters, curriculum development, curriculum evaluation, curriculum

implementation, curriculum policy development and analysis are always the key topics and “preoccupations” of curriculum research and inquiry (see Connelly & Xu, 2010).

This is a challenge to contemporary curriculum theorizing or reconceptualist curriculum studies that does not connect centrally or directly with the real-world practice of schooling, nor concerns itself with the ultimate task of school advancement. This type of curriculum inquiry produces “free-floating discourse that flees from the task of understanding the work of schooling” (Westbury, 2009, p. 7). Curriculum theory, Connelly and Xu (2010) argued, “is not derived merely from theoretical, post-modern abstract thought” but “takes places in the ... contextual frames that surround the practice of curriculum” (p. 326). I hope that more and more Chinese scholars will conduct curriculum inquiry and research in the spirit of the practical, with a central concern for the improvement of the quality and work of schooling in China.

## Notes

1. The earlier version of this article is a keynote address at the 13th Cross-Strait Curriculum Theory Conference, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 9–11 December, 2011.
2. For example, prior to the implementation of the new curriculum reform, an expert group consisting of curriculum specialists, educational theorists, subject matter experts and school teachers was formed to deliberate on the vision and aims of the reform, draft a guiding framework, and provide consultations on implementation issues (Deng, 2011).

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## 課程探究之為何與何為：施瓦布實踐取向的再認識

鄧宗怡

### 摘要

為何作課程探究？甚麼是課程探究？本文從施瓦布（Schwab, 1969/1978a）實踐取向的角度檢討這兩個問題，並對中國內地和北美課程探究的狀況作批判的審視。文章的中心論點是：課程探究主要是實踐性的探究，其最終目標是改進學校教育，而關注焦點是社會文化、教育體制、學校與課堂背景中學校內部的工作。本文進一步論述課程探究的「課程」特徵，並批判課程再概念學派與學校實踐脫節。

關鍵詞：課程探究；課程理論；實踐取向；課程實踐

