

Book Review

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Zongyi Deng. (2020). *Knowledge, content, curriculum and didaktik: Beyond social realism*. Abingdon: Routledge. 112 pp.

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For those who are interested in curriculum but need more understanding of theories, this book by Zongyi Deng is an excellent beginning and cutting-edge academic work. Currently serving as the executive editor of the Journal of Curriculum Studies, Deng critically evaluates prevailing influential theories before presenting his alternative curriculum theory. What distinguishes Deng's theory in this work are two key features. First, he emphasises the importance of practice, claiming that issues concerning practice are the starting points of curriculum inquiry. By spotlighting the role of teachers in shaping curriculum content, Deng shifts his focus on curriculum from the traditional theoretical and policy level to the programmatic and classroom level. Second, Deng combines German educational philosophy and pedagogy (specifically, Didaktik, a German educational tradition highlighting the prior existence of education vision and the dignity of practice) with curriculum sociology, which makes his theory more philosophically grounded. That is to say, Deng's theory is more robust and applicable in diverse educational contexts, compared to those theories merely based on specific situations.

The particular focus on practice is one of the most notable features of this book, which allows teachers and researchers with rich educational practice experience to easily resonate with the content as they read. Deng's rich experience spearheading Singapore's national curriculum reform allows this book to go beyond abstract theories to delve into the practical implementation of curriculum changes. By analysing Singapore's curriculum reform through the lens of his own theory, Deng offers a unique perspective that has been shaped by hands-on involvement in educational transformation.



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without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (<https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage>).

In this book, Deng repeatedly emphasises the influence of Schwab, a US educational theorist who advocates that curriculum studies is a discipline centrally concerned with practice, and discusses issues for the advancement of education. Inspired by Schwab, in Chapter ‘Conclusion: beyond social realism’ Deng constructs a “powerful” curriculum theory by embedding the “practice-context-theory nexus” in the societal and institutional context of schooling. He places practice at the centre, and the context of schooling provides curriculum practice with a clue to understanding related issues.

As for theories, they are generated in practice and help formulate solutions to curriculum practice problems. In Chapter ‘Aims of schooling, school subjects and knowledge questions’, Deng illustrates this theory using a three-level conceptual framework to discuss curriculum issues: policy, programmatic, and classroom. The policy curriculum frames the broad goals and general approaches to teaching and learning with respect to society and culture. The programmatic curriculum translates the ideals and expectations into operational programs and subjects for school and classroom use. By addressing these varying layers, the book ensures that readers from diverse professional backgrounds can derive relevant and actionable insights, making it a valuable resource for anyone involved in the education sector. For example, a high school history teacher might use Deng’s framework to design a curriculum that not only covers historical facts but also encourages students to engage critically with historical sources and narratives. In Chapter ‘Liberal education, bildung and theory of knowledge’, Deng states that the classroom curriculum involves transforming the programmatic curriculum into instructional events and experiences. Within this framework, Deng addresses fundamental questions of knowledge issues, such as how knowledge is selected, transformed, and conveyed into curriculum planning and classroom instructions. By engaging with these pivotal questions, Deng offers invaluable insights that empower educators and curriculum developers to make informed decisions and nurture meaningful learning experiences for their students.

Another pivotal aspect of this book’s curriculum theory revolves around the rich legacy of the German didaktik tradition, which provides teachers with interesting new perspectives for reflecting on their daily teaching practices. In the realm of German educational philosophy, education is regarded as a distinctively human action, with human plasticity serving as its foundational principle. Deng, grounding his perspective in the concept of human plasticity, defines his model as Bildung-centered Didaktik. In simple terms, ‘Bildung’ is all about self-development. It emphasizes self-awareness, and social responsibilities through interactions with the world. This expands the discussion on pedagogy beyond the confines of educational studies, connecting it with bigger philosophical ideas. Deng endeavors to reshape curriculum content, placing a central emphasis on cultivating human powers. He encapsulates his theory as a ‘powerful curriculum theory,’ underscoring that the potency of knowledge lies in its potential contribution to the development of human power.

To illustrate the practical application of the ‘powerful curriculum theory’ for teachers, Deng delves into the geography curriculum in Chapter ‘Pedagogy content knowledge reconceived’. Here, Deng argues that teachers should grapple with their fundamental purpose: fostering the development of human capabilities. In other words, while students do need to acquire specific geographical facts, the primary objective is to nurture the capacity to ‘think geographically’ within the overarching context of the discipline of geography. This approach transforms the role of the teacher from merely transmitting information to actively engaging students in the process of knowledge construction. Moreover, Deng posits that the curriculum in the classroom should aim to ‘design opportunities for students to make fruitful encounters with the content’, thereby opening avenues for cultivation. This involves creating a learning environment where students can explore and interact with the material in a way that sparks curiosity and encourages deeper understanding. By doing so, students are not just passive recipients of information but active participants in their

own learning journey. From this dynamic perspective, teaching emerges as an intergenerational task between the content and the students. Through the presentation of tangible teaching examples, Deng endeavors to instill in teachers the motivation to situate their pedagogical approaches within a larger context, prompting them to engage in reflective practices that consistently revisit their primary purposes.

Undoubtedly, the book will give food for thought to scholars interested in education and enlighten teachers to reflect on their pedagogy. Curriculum researchers will find this book to be an excellent starting point, as Deng's systematic review of the entire field stands out as a valuable reference. In this book, he offers a comprehensive understanding of contemporary curriculum theories and provides a glimpse into the latest research developments in this field. As for teachers, this book serves as a helpful handbook to reflect on their daily work, offering philosophical-grounded insights that allow them to extract the theoretical concepts behind their daily teaching strategies. By understanding the theories, teachers are able to apply these strategies more effectively.

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