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Envisioned and enacted practices: educational policies and the ‘politics of use’ in schools

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ABSTRACT

It is widely known that there is a discrepancy between educational policy on the one side, and teaching and learning practices on the other. Most studies have been focusing on the sociocultural and micropolitical frames that shape teachers’ understandings and enactments of teaching, and that cause the vast diversity of classroom practices around the world. This article wants to draw attention to the ‘politics of use’ in teachers’ work: how teachers mobilize larger political narratives when implementing curriculum reform. Arguably, these narratives provide a shortcut between the central government and street-level actors, thus circumventing the logics of these actors’ immediate institutional environments.

In order to showcase the politics of use, the article uses the case of *education for creativity* as it is designed for and practiced at Chinese schools. The case reveals how education for creativity is compromised by requirements emanating from larger political programs when implemented in Chinese classrooms. The article challenges the view that educational policy necessarily moves through a trickle-down process, from higher to medium to lower-level actors. In cases of strong ideological alignment between street-level actors and central state actors, educational policy may in fact sidestep and hence neutralize important institutional actors.

KEYWORDS

Educational policy; teaching practice; policy-practice divide; politics of use; China

Introduction

Intended outcomes of educational policies are seldom identical with these policies’ factual outcomes. What is designed in ministries, debated among academics, incorporated into teacher training and school curricula, and taught at the classroom level is hardly the same thing. Numerous scholars and research traditions both within education studies and other social sciences have been investigating the reasons behind the policy-practice divide. Most attempts to explain this divide are either explicitly or implicitly based on assumed antagonisms of a dichotomous nature, such as of macropolitics (in the larger political environment) vs. micropolitics (in local organizations like the school), or structure vs. agency, global/national policies vs. local actors, and so on. This article challenges these dichotomous explanations and argues instead for a nested approach that regards the macro as part of the micro. By developing the concept of the *politics of use*,¹ the article maintains that implementors and users of school policies and curricula on the ground, such as school principals and teachers, do not necessarily always act as *part* of their organization but may in fact also act *in spite* of their immediate institutional environment. Depending on their ideological alignment with central organs of power, these street-level actors can be found to skip the logic of action within their organization (i.e. the school and the subsystem

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of education), in favour of realizing larger political narratives that run at least partially counter to their organization's and/or subsystem's declared purpose and objectives.

In order to showcase how the politics of use can work on the ground, the article uses the case of *education for creativity/innovation* as it is designed for and practiced at Chinese schools. Creativity is widely considered a prerequisite for innovative capacity and thus for a country's successful integration into the global knowledge economy (Peters, Marginson, & Murphy, 2009). Worldwide, 'creativity' and 'innovation' have been figuring as increasingly important concepts in policy papers, both regarding education and beyond. Education has attained a key role in fostering creative, and thereby economically useful, human capital. In a way one could argue that education for creativity reconciles the progressive tradition within education studies with economic views of education: skills and competences that earlier were seen as conducive for individual development and empowerment are now also deemed to have a positive effect on knowledge production and hence economic growth. While there is no ultimate consensus regarding either the definition or the operationalization of education for creativity and innovation, the OECD (2014) has attempted to identify indicators that can point to whether a given education system can be called 'innovative'. Crucial aspects include issues such as class organization, assessment methods, student/teacher recruitment and school evaluation, collaboration with other sectors/actors, as well as teaching practices and the use of new technologies and media. What exactly each of these items needs to look like in order to qualify as 'innovative' remains however murky and open to interpretation. Most often, involved actors and observers are content if things are done differently from the past, to label these changes as 'innovative'.²

Also in China, there have been numerous attempts since the late 1990s to reform the curriculum into a programme that puts more emphasis on creativity and innovation (Zhong & Cui, 2001). Departing from the assumption that the conventional school system with its stress on rote learning and test scores does not produce the graduates needed for the knowledge society of the 21st century, the new curriculum intends to advance active, holistic, cross-disciplinary, and experienced-based learning; locally relevant and practically applicable knowledge; as well as approaches that form learners as socially responsible, creative, and informed citizens. Chinese policy papers in education are by now studded with references to innovation³; every day, the Ministry of Education's (MOE) website publishes dozens of announcements and papers that deal with innovation in education. The Ten Year Plan outlining the direction for educational reform during the period between 2010 and 2020 (PRC (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China), 2010) associates innovation above all with human capital and the nation state's capacity for renewal, a new educational spirit and continuous educational reform, new technologies and scientific development, new forms of teacher recruitment and educational governance, and new pedagogies (including the use of information and communication technologies for education). Creativity and innovation have by now become integral parts of curriculum debates and reforms in China.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section will briefly describe the approach chosen for this article, and provide information about what materials were used for the empirical examples. In a subsequent section, various theoretical approaches will be discussed which have addressed the policy-practice divide in education. Building upon and expanding the framework put forward by Bacharach and Mundell (1993) on organizational politics in schools, the section will introduce the concept of 'politics of use' for explaining how macropolitics meets the classroom. The ensuing section will adopt the politics of use approach for the Chinese case, and discuss examples from the Chinese classroom that can illustrate how education for creativity as demanded by the new curriculum intersects with requirements emanating from larger political programs when implemented in teaching. A brief conclusion will put the findings in a broader context.

Approach and materials

The article puts forward a conceptual argument by maintaining that we need to consider what I call the *politics of use* when looking into policy implementation processes in the classroom. The article's approach is therefore driven by a theoretical interest in how we can explain the gap between policy and practice in education (and potentially elsewhere), without reducing this gap to a simple antagonism between the macro and the micro. In the theoretical discussion, explanatory approaches are selected that have both been influential within educational research, and that are to an extent compatible with the approach suggested in this article. The proposed concept of the *politics of use* does therefore not constitute a completely alternative approach to analysing the policy-practice gap but rather serves to expand and complement existing theoretical explanations.

The materials used for illustrating the empirical examples are of a twofold nature.⁴ For motivating the focus on innovation and creativity, both Chinese policy documents by the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) and debate articles by Chinese educational researchers were consulted. These materials helped to (i) ascertain the relevance of innovation/creativity for Chinese curriculum reform; and (ii) identify how academic and policy actors understand innovation and creativity in relation to education. The empirical examples from the classrooms are taken from data collected during fieldwork at Chinese schools in Beijing, Kunming, Zhejiang Province, and the greater Chongqing area between 2010 and 2017. They all have in common that the involved local actors—teachers and school principals—presented and interpreted these examples as innovative and creative, and hence in line with the new curriculum. The number of examples presented is by no means exhaustive; there were many more examples of teaching and learning that were labelled 'creative' or 'innovative'. However, by deliberately choosing examples of different types—group activities, retreats/corners, and story projects—the article covers a relatively wide array of educational sites where the politics of use becomes tangible.

Envisioned and enacted practices: theoretical explanations

Researchers in education and elsewhere have noted the divide between policy and outcome: practices as envisioned by policy makers look differently when being enacted on the ground. Already early on, the policy implementation literature has been interested in the incongruences between policy formulations on the one side, and outcomes and impact on the other (O'Toole, 2000). For example, Van Meter and Van Horn (1975) have distinguished between objectives of a policy and resources allocated to that policy, to then take into account interorganizational communication and enforcement activities, characteristics of implementing agencies, and more generally the economic, social, and political conditions, all of which impact how implementors are able to perform a policy. Regarding the implementation of education policy, the focus has often been on school personnel (administrators, principals, teachers) and how they negotiate, adapt, and frame policies within their organizations (Honig, 2006). Particularly with regard to the role of teachers as policy implementors, scholars have stressed their agency as members of communities of practice, with particular professional identities and situated within particular organizational settings (Coburn & Stein, 2006).

There is general agreement among scholars that teaching practices are not only part of the classroom situation, but they further interact with various ideas and practices located above the level of the classroom (see Figure 1): they engage with school policies, school and teacher organization, and various forms of teacher training (both pre-service and in-service); the kind of teaching guidelines and materials at disposal (such as various national, regional, and local curricula and textbooks); those again are partially an outcome of academic research and discourse, as well as of various forms of policy-making among political bodies. While we tend to locate *visions* of schools and education at the top level and *enactment* of these visions at the bottom level, it is important to point out that this distinction is more apparent than real. Street-level actors produce and develop their own ideas, visions, and

programs (if at a more local scale); while top-level actors are also involved in enactment practices (even if usually not directly involved in teaching), such as connecting with lobby organizations, performing at policy discussion meetings, and so on. In [Figure 1](#), this involvement of all levels in both envisioning and enacting is illustrated by the two triangles: the reversed triangle denotes the vision-making, which arguably has a broader orientation at the top than at the bottom; while the upright triangle shows to what extent the enactment of these visions is taking place—with arguably a wider range of enactment practices at the bottom than at the top.

Lastly, all of these levels are embedded in global and political-sociocultural environments that both feed into national, regional, and local envisioning and enacting, as well as these latter can form into more or less influential forces at the global level (think e.g. of so-called local 'best practices' that become circulated worldwide, or the global impact of domestic educational policies in nation states whose education systems are considered excellent according to international ranking tables). The term 'global environments' makes consciously use of the plural. The global can be perceived and constructed quite differently across time and space, and among diverse groups of actors, which makes it conceptually impossible to speak of only one global environment (Schriewer & Martinez, 2004; Schulte, 2012). While we can assume that global influences are thicker at the top than at the bottom (indicated by the darker shading of the cloud in [Figure 1](#)), also local actors interact with global environments, e.g. through media, international exchanges etc. Conversely, sociocultural factors (indicated by a lighter shading) can be assumed most diverse and intense at the bottom levels (think e.g. of school-parent interaction) but of course play a role even for national policy making.

So, how can we explain the policy-practice divide against this background? A somewhat simple but perhaps compelling answer could be to assume that in many cases, policies are not meant to be taken seriously from the outset. While we would naturally expect a policy to be designed in order to change (and possibly improve) e.g. social welfare, policy-making can also take place for the purpose of pleasing and appeasing certain groups. These groups may be important domestically (political partners, parents as voters, etc.) or internationally (international donors, the international community, etc.). The objective is to change perception and acceptance, rather than action and structures.

While one could dismiss such policy-making as mere hypocrisy, it has been pointed out that it may also serve the purpose of 'mobilising public opinion and resources to move into the direction of attaining the [policy; BS] goals' (Ramirez, 2012, p. 11). Thus, non-committed policy-making may constitute a first step towards more realistic changes. Indicators for policy simulation are for

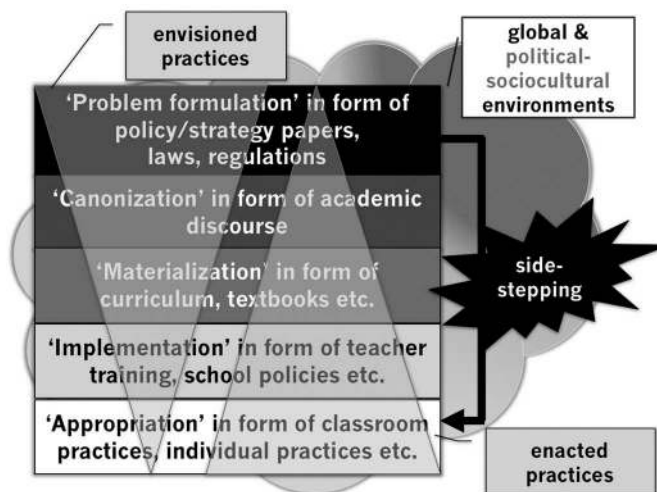


Figure 1. Envisioned and enacted practices across levels of actors.

example no or lacking resources allocated to the policy, lack or mismatch of implementing agencies, and absence of clearly defined milestones and criteria of success, making an assessment of the policy's implementation difficult. The educational sector is replete with cosmetic policy making, some of which may even serve a purpose opposite to the one proclaimed. Anderson (1998) has for example shown how American reforms with the purpose of making education more 'participatory' were mainly designed for gaining more legitimacy in the public's eyes, or even for attaining more subtle control in the classrooms.

Another frequent argument in the discussion about the policy-practice divide is the assumption of a time lag between policy decision and implementation, or, as Phillips and Ochs (2003, p. 459) express it, a 'possible time lag or delays in the impact of key factors'. This is a rather pragmatic approach: it acknowledges the fact that implementation has occurred only partially (or not at all), but argues that with sufficient time and patience, there will be incremental changes generated by this policy.

The idea of a time lag in policy implementation is not so much part of a distinct theoretical tradition but can be found across diverse scholarly works on policy implementation. The lag is seen to exist either between educational policy and other policy processes, such as teacher education reform being disconnected from other reform projects (e.g. Earley, Imig, & Michelli, 2011), or between a specific educational policy and its measurable outcomes, such as in teacher and student performance whose improvement is delayed by the complexity of context (e.g. Cochran-Smith, 2004). In particular historical studies, or research investigating long-term developments of educational reforms, have been able to point to effects of educational policies, even though these were seldom immediate or straightforward (e.g. Rury, 2013). Also, studies within the neo-institutionalist world culture approach have shown how despite national differences, education systems around the world can be found to be converging due to transnational policy diffusion (e.g. Ramirez, 2012). Persisting incongruencies between policy and practice are explained by the 'loose coupling' between more global policy objectives and more local, contextual conditions (ibid., pp. 9ff.). However, historical approaches have also shown how policy outcomes have proven ephemeral and/or marginal (e.g. Schulte, 2013), so that the argument of a time lag in policy implementation may in the end simply constitute one out of many factors to consider when looking at the relationship between policy and practice.

There is a whole range of studies particularly within the field of comparative and international education that are specifically interested in what the world culture approach somewhat quickly dismisses as 'loose coupling', namely the logics behind the local divergence from central or global policy objectives. While these studies belong to diverse theoretical and methodological traditions, they share the view that policies—be they globally diffused or nationally designed, or both—go through processes of contextualization and appropriation once they interact with local actors. Basically, one can discern two different approaches regarding this contextualization process. On one side, local actors, or the local system, are considered agents who are actively seeking to 'borrow' ideas, programs, or reforms from outside. For example, from a systems theory perspective, these processes have been explained with the help of the concept of 'externalization' (Schriewer, 1990; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014): responding to local needs, actors externalize to ideas outside their own system in order to fix perceived problems within their own context and add legitimacy to their actions by referring to an authoritative 'Other'.⁵

On the other side, local actors are rather seen as being confronted (often involuntarily) with ideas and reforms coming from outside (or above), so that they need to develop strategies to deal with these, while at the same time maintaining their own (professional) identities and agendas (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). For example, studies of how teachers 'enact' reforms within the organizational setting of the school reveal how local actors both constrain and enable policy implementation, and thereby profoundly shape educational policy on the ground (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011). Similarly, studies on teachers' 'micropolitical literacy' (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002) investigate how teachers negotiate policy on the ground. In order to be able to read the

micropolitical character of a situation, teachers are understood as drawing on a repertoire of micropolitical strategies, with the help of which they can gain control over their situation. These strategies include 'critical compliance', 'accommodative resistance', and 'resistant alteration' (Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017), thus displaying different degrees of teacher alignment with organizational policies.

Irrespective of whether street-level actors are seen as actively *seeking* or reactively *coping* with changes coming from outside, both approaches assume that actors, firstly, are situated in a local, indigenous environment of beliefs and practices, and, secondly, are aware of, or even interacting with, external policy environments. This requires constant translation work on the side of local actors: they need to balance external with internal rationales, and need to translate policy goals, programs, and ideas into words and action that make sense within their own cultural and institutional framework (Czarniawska & Sevón, 1996; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014).

Organizational or policy translation, it has been shown, can be selective, picking only those components of a policy that are deemed compatible with the local environment, beneficial in the light of local conditions, or sellable to the local community (e.g. Schulte, 2013; Steiner-Khamsi, 2005). Translation strategies may also include both empty proclaiming and silent borrowing (on the latter, see Waldow, 2009)—two strategies that have been termed isonymism and isopraxis, respectively (Erlingsdóttir & Lindberg, 2005; Solli, Demediuk, & Sims, 2005). In the first case, actors proclaim to be using a concept, a policy, or a program, without actually implementing it ('talk the talk'); while in the second case, actors are introducing and implementing these without admitting to this officially ('walk the walk'). Again, both strategies intertwine with what is considered legitimate within and across local contexts.

Besides contextualization and translation, these approaches further share the conception of a trickle-down effect in policy diffusion and implementation. That is, policies are expected to move through various levels (as those shown in Figure 1), to then become enacted and thereby appropriated at the lowest level. Each level is conceived as operating within its own organizational logic, consisting of particular traditions and collective memories, rules and structures, routines and scripts, as well as specific languages and identities. In that sense, levels and their actors are considered to possess a certain degree of both receptivity and autonomy: they open up for ideas and directives coming from outside, but also channel and morph what is coming in. These level-specific, internal processes can be succinctly captured by the term 'micropolitics', which Malen and Cochran (2015, p. 4), with regard to the school, define as 'mini political systems, nested in multilevel governmental structures that set the authoritative parameters for the play of power at the site level', which is 'characterized by conflict, competition, cooperation, compromise, and co-optation'.

The question of how this mini system, or subsystem, persists vis-à-vis the upper levels—what is commonly understood as this subsystem's autonomy—has been resurfacing in various ways in the research literature, particularly with regard to teachers. Often, teachers have been depicted as a critical force that constitutes a counterweight and potential corrective to the power of the state. Within the tradition of radical pedagogy, for example, the nature of school knowledge as a reflection of the wider social structure has been critically questioned (Whitty, 2017/1985), and teachers have been envisioned as potential agents of change (Young, 1971), who can help to empower the weak and marginalized. Micropolitics at the school level has thus often been viewed as a form of resistance to macropolitics. However, throughout this critique, the macropolitical has remained seriously undertheorized—as some sort of hegemonic force or power that is there, and that actors need to relate to, but without including the macropolitical systematically into the conceptual and/or analytical framework. Malen and Cochran (2015, p. 25) for instance note that 'the macro-forces in the policy environment may be among the most critical factors affecting the micro-politics in schools', but do not suggest any strategy as to how to incorporate this factor in the analysis. Also Kelchtermans and Vanassche (2017, p. 450) mention in passing that micropolitics needs to meet macropolitics, and conclude from this that teacher education needs to develop in student teachers 'a critical, thorough understanding of the larger power structures, discursive

hegemonies, and structural injustices in society, deeply affecting children, their lives and educational opportunities'. But again, neither the normative premises of such types of teacher education, nor the potential conceptual approaches towards these macro-micro relations are illuminated further.

Interestingly, those scholars that do consider the macropolitical—if only to a limited extent—tend to construct teachers as agents with critical distance from the larger political system. Such views embrace the idea of the teacher being a critical human being in the first place, who has internalized exactly the kind of understanding as outlined by Kelchtermans and Vanassche above: micropolitical skills that empower teachers vis-à-vis larger hegemonies threatening local well-being. However, it is not a given that micropolitical skills will always work for the sake of the teacher as a critical agent, or for the subsystem's own micropolitical mission. It is equally conceivable that micropolitical engagement instead represents the interests of the larger system: micropolitical skills may in fact also be used to lever out local traditions, scripts, and values, rather than defend or strengthen them. The difference is a normative one: in one case, teachers are regarded as legitimate advocates of 'education as empowerment' at the local level; in the other, teachers are considered agents of larger political environments (such as the state), who carry out central missions at the local level in spite of local institutional inertia or resistance.

Thus, policy enactment is not simply translation in the sense of negotiating, selecting, adjusting, and appropriating policy on the ground. Rather, enactment means also putting values into use within an environment that is characterized by both micropolitical and macropolitical interests—policy enactment means engaging in the *politics of use*. Politics is understood here in both a literal and a broader sense: as a struggle over values and power in the light of very real political messages (such as those communicated by the central government).

When policies, reforms, and new curricula are put into use in the classroom, they become necessarily imbued with normative conceptions and values. Whose values the politics of use mobilizes depends both on the teachers' previous training and socialization, and on the school's/subsystem's autonomy vis-à-vis other sectors, including the state. It can be assumed that the more teacher education is aligned with the objectives of the state, and the more in-service teachers are directly and continuously exposed to state narratives, the less likely it is that organizational levels and actors in between will interfere in the process of policy implementation. Thus, in the case of minimal autonomy of the subsystem and maximum exposure to state narratives, teachers will try to align policy implementation with what they perceive to be the state's interests. This results in an implementation short-cut in which centrally released policies can jump various levels of implementation: intermediary actors and organizations are being side-stepped (see the explosive cloud in [Figure 1](#)).

A politics of use approach has the advantage of breaking up the dichotomy of policy-making on the one side, and instances of sense-making, enacting, and reflecting on the other. It views sense-making actors as potentially complicit in constructing the larger political environment. Thus, local actors are not only considered members of an organization who appropriate new policies and in the process secure and/or legitimize their own interests. Rather, these actors are also potential central agents, who partake in developing overarching policy goals at the local level—at the same time as this work becomes synchronized with the organizational logics of the school, and the professional logics of being a teacher.

In accordance with Bacharach and Mundell (1993), the politics of use approach views schools as political organizations, 'because structures cannot predict all situations, leaving uncertainty amid which meaning and action remain to be negotiated by the participants' (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993, p. 426) Bacharach and Mundell argue that both uncertainty and bounded rationality—meaning that there can be no completely rational decisions, as the information provided to actors is never complete—create spaces for political negotiation. Within these spaces, an organization's 'logic of action' emerges, which 'may be seen as the implicit (that is, often unstated) relationship between means and goals that is assumed by actors in organizations' (*ibid.*, p. 427).

An organization like the school can have different and at times conflicting logics of action (e.g. bureaucratic/administrative vs. professional). For their case, Bacharach and Mundell identify a contradiction between the logics of excellence (of the school/of education) versus the logics of equity, and show how for each of these logics, actors' goals and means intertwine with different understandings of ideology and policy. In the following, Bacharach's and Mundell's matrix will be adapted in order to capture the logics of action for the Chinese case, as will be presented in the next section.

'Innovation' and 'creativity' on the ground: putting policy into practice in Chinese classrooms

As noted in the introduction, the Chinese curriculum reform aims above all at innovation: the credo is to move from the label 'made in China' to 'created in China'. The policy goal is to achieve creative outcomes beyond mere test results, and to move away from a system that is solely defined by high-stakes examinations (see Table 1). The instrument deemed most crucial for rendering education more creative is to diversify techniques of teaching: from lessons marked by lecturing style, chorus speaking, and rote learning, to more interactive classroom situations that are more tailored to the students' needs and interests. The ideology behind this diversification, according to both the MOE and Chinese educational researchers, is student-centred learning, as only this approach is seen to guarantee the fulfilment of the curriculum objectives as specified in the introduction to this article: active, holistic, cross-disciplinary, and experienced-based learning; locally relevant and practically applicable knowledge; and learners who are socially responsible, creative, and informed citizens.

In contrast to this, school teachers and principals refer first and foremost to the need of establishing a sound moral attitude, which they see as a counterweight to an exam-oriented, and thus selfish, mindset (see Table 2). Morality is also both a virtue and a skill that are judged to be on the wane since China has embarked on liberal market reforms and has left the socialist path, which was characterized by clear moral messages. The policy goal is therefore to develop the student's character, and in line with the MOE and Chinese educational researchers, teachers and principals consider a diversification of teaching techniques as the appropriate means to achieve this goal. However, the underlying ideological rationale behind this diversification is not learning that truly centres on students, but classroom techniques that can collectively mobilize students, thus reaching not only for students' minds but also for their hearts.

Note that the fourth quadrant in both matrices looks identical: both groups of actors see the diversification of teaching techniques as an appropriate means to carry through curriculum reform. However, since the ideological goals and means behind this diversification differ—innovation vs. morality, and student-centred learning vs. student mobilization—we can regard this congruence as more technical than substantial.

At first glance, the interpretation of curricular goals and their underlying ideology by the teachers and principals may surprise. Why would they moralize the innovation discourse that is so prevalent both in ministry papers and in academic discourse, and that is even put into written

Table 1. Manifestations of logic of educational actors (academia and Ministry of Education).

	Ideology	Policy
Goals	Innovation	Creative outcomes beyond test results
Means	Student-centred learning	<i>Diversification of teaching techniques</i>

Table 2. Manifestations of logic of school-level actors and state narratives.

	Ideology	Policy
Goals	Morality	Character development
Means	Student mobilization	<i>Diversification of teaching techniques</i>

form in the curricular guidelines? There are two possible explanations, which partially overlap. Firstly, teachers and principals express their concerns that the Chinese school system's strong orientation towards exams leaves a moral vacuum, in which students fail to develop as morally sound human beings. They point to the lack of guidance coming from the curriculum and textbooks, forcing them to come up with 'their own ideas' as to how to bring morals back into teaching and learning. They also frequently reminisce about stronger moral guidance in the past, and that it is the teacher's task to retrieve some of the previous moral drive.

These ideas—and this moves us to the second part of the explanation—intersect with larger political narratives as communicated by the state media: the citizen's responsibility to be both patriotic and cosmopolitan; to know the West but preserve the Chinese tradition; to collectively work towards the future and realize the 'Chinese dream', and so on. In this moralization discourse among teachers and principals, we find no references to curricular guidelines but rather to pamphlets and directives as issued by the central leadership, and diffused in the news and popular media. Particularly after 2012, when Xi Jinping came to power, leading to a gradual re-ideologization of society and the educational sector, teachers and principals alike refer to, or cite directly from, statements made by the highest political leaders in order to express their moral drive. This constitutes a clear example of 'side-stepping' as discussed above: teachers engage directly with the central ideology and thus neutralize the logics of both their primary and secondary institutional environments, the school and the education system.

In the following, three types of examples will be briefly presented that can show how pedagogies labeled as 'innovative' by teachers and principals mainly serve the purpose of moralizing students, rather than turning them into innovative learners.

Group activities. Group activities are by now ubiquitous in Chinese classrooms. There is hardly a lesson in which teachers do not engage students in group discussion. Officially, group activities are to make learning more interactive, more cooperative, and more tied to students' real-life experiences. When put into use, however, group activities show three characteristics that cast doubt as to whether these objectives are intended at all. Firstly, these activities last no longer than one to two minutes in average. In no school subject this short amount of time allows for any serious discussion of subject matter. Secondly, in nearly all cases, students in the same group all talk at the same time. In classes of 40 students in average, with group members in about 10 groups talking simultaneously, it becomes virtually impossible to hear what individual students are saying. Consequently, no cooperative learning or sharing is taking place. Thirdly, most group activities end as abruptly as they are started. Sometimes, the 'correct' results are briefly reported; but in no case, the (potentially different) results were observed to be discussed across groups. In sum, group activities are rather used as collective exercises than as interactive, cooperative learning activities.

Retreats/'corners'. Many Chinese preschools feature nowadays 'retreats' or 'book corners' in their classrooms. To the children, they are to constitute refuges that enable independent, child-directed learning. Hypothetically, such retreats stand in stark contrast to the otherwise strictly organized daily schedule of the preschool, which mainly consists of teacher-directed, collective activities. However, a closer look at how retreats are put into use reveals three things: firstly, retreats are most often arranged in open space rather than in a room's corner. Children using the retreat are therefore exposed to all passers-by. Secondly, the material provided in these retreats consists mainly of children's books with a heavy moral tone. The moral imperative of these retreats is moreover reinforced by these retreats' decoration, usually entailing Chinese flags and posters with moral messages (about diligence, respect, perseverance, helpfulness etc.). Thirdly, this author has never seen a child using the retreats without being accompanied by a teacher,⁶ making it highly improbable that these retreats will induce self-directed learning. Instead, they are used for unruly or restless children, who are to calm down before re-joining the collective.

Story projects. At a number of schools, students are engaged in so-called story projects for which they are to collect material outside the classroom. The projects narrate the everyday life of one chosen classmate in the form of photo presentations and an accompanying, recorded story about

this classmate's life. The principals presented this as an innovative approach to both media training and integration of life experiences in the school context. The presentation of each story project is followed by 'class discussions', which move along a highly formalized moral agenda. Students had been previously handed out a booklet listing a whole range of morally appropriate behaviours, and on the basis of this booklet, students are required to identify the type of moral behaviour shown in the story project, by pointing to the right page number and heading. Each identified behaviour is then read out aloud, and repeated in chorus by the class. Teachers mentioned repeatedly how this moral framework helped make up for the lack of moral guidance in Chinese schools. The booklet is not part of the officially provided textbook material but compiled by the head principal (who is overseeing several schools) himself. The idea has gained quickly in popularity and has been diffused to a growing number of schools in the city.

All three examples were praised as innovative and creativity-enhancing by local actors. Is this the kind of innovation that educational researchers and the MOE envision when they want learning to be more creative, in order to catapult Chinese learners into the knowledge economy of the 21st century? The above-mentioned Development Plan for Education (2010–2010) demands the following of an education reformed according to the new guidelines:

Putting stress on an integration of learning and thinking. Advancing a pedagogy that is characterized by stimulation, inquiry, discussion, and participation, helping students to learn how to learn. Encouraging students' curiosity, nurturing students' interests and hobbies, building a favorable environment [marked by students'; BS] independent thinking, free exploration, and brave innovation.

(PRC (The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China), 2010)

At a roundtable reported by the MOE's *Chinese Educational Newspaper* (Yu, Lai, & Shi, 2017), leading educational scholars and policy consultants maintain that much more emphasis needs to be put on the process of learning (rather than on its results) and on the development of thinking (rather than just studying); on student-centred (rather than teacher-centred) learning; on letting students learn and think for themselves; on 'nurturing innovative thinking among students'; and on the teacher as an enabling agent, guiding the way (rather than directing students). A number of scholars address the Chinese system's shortcomings, such as too much stress on content knowledge instead of procedural and epistemic knowledge (the latter two being considered more conducive for innovation; Zhang, Wan, & Xue, 2017); as well as a lack of creativity, critical thinking, and application of knowledge (Wu, 2015).

When the new curriculum is put to use in the classroom, however, these skills and competences as demanded by both the Ministry papers and educational scholars appear to be put in the rear. Superficially, the techniques used—group activity, different spatial organization, project work—seem to reaffirm the policy and ideology goals as proclaimed by the Ministry, as they really do constitute a diversification of teaching techniques that have the potential of leading to more student-centred learning. However, when applied in a teaching context and hence imbued with values, these techniques are found to rather aim at character development and a moralization of the student body. This is done in light of a constantly stated lack of morals in Chinese schools (and in the wider Chinese society), and against the background of frequently cited political paroles that demand a moralization of society on the ideological terms as defined by the Party leadership. Curriculum implementation has thus gone through a politics of use in which the macropolitical outweighs the micropolitical, and in which teachers' interests have been brought in line with the state's interests.

Conclusion: schools and the 'politics of use'

Micropolitics is about how actors or groups of actors negotiate different logics of action among themselves (e.g. Ball, 1987); while a macropolitical analysis investigates how '*logics of action that are generated by external interest groups penetrate the organization*' (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993, p. 432;

emphasis in original). In the Chinese case, these external interest groups are represented by central political organs. Teachers are not only part of the educational system and its organizations, such as the school, but also of the wider political system. Policies do not necessarily always get processed consecutively by moving from one level to the next (e.g. from the central to the educational system), but the political can be found to circumvent the logic of the educational system by establishing a direct shortcut to the teachers. This is especially prevalent in cases when the educational system has only limited autonomy vis-à-vis the state, and in societies where there is a high degree of direct political indoctrination (e.g. through state-controlled or state-censored media).

For central actors like the Chinese state, this tactic also works as risk mitigation. An overly orientation towards innovative and independent thinking among students bears the risk of backfiring on the ideological monopoly of the Party state. Thus, even though scientific innovation is in the state's interest, political actors need to find ways to define the terms on which education for innovation is taking place. By acting through street-level agents, the state can prevent larger political goals from becoming compromised by educational reforms. As an add-on, these street-level actors, through their re-interpretation and re-enactment of innovation and creativity along state-directed rationales, may succeed in finding ways of gaining more subtle access to students' hearts and minds than had been possible by way of exam cramming and rote-learning.

The politics of use approach reveals the dual political literacy that street-level actors, such as teachers and school principals, are required to possess. On the one side, and as has been pointed out above with regard to previous research, teachers need to be able to read their micropolitical environment in order to both implement the curriculum and remain in control (Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017). Additionally however, as has been argued in this article, teachers must on the other side also have the ability to read the macropolitical situation, particularly when their immediate organizational contexts display a high degree of permeability for influences from outside, or formulated more normatively: when school contexts are vulnerable to political exposure.

Consequently, teachers may find themselves in the paradoxical situation that they need to implement the curriculum without putting into use the curriculum's ideological and political goals; that is, they need to implement a reform without implementing this reform's spirit. This requires of teachers, firstly, the rather complex skill of understanding the double-speak of policy documents, including the contradictions and tensions that arise when policy goals as pushed by one sector (in this case, the educational sector) may jeopardize the policy goals of another (in this case, central state leadership); secondly, it requires the sensitivity to determine which of the goals are to be prioritized in teachers' everyday work. What becomes visible then as a policy-practice divide is less the dilution, distortion, or (partial) neglect of central policy goals, but the result of the teachers' politics of use: of deciding which and whose political values will be put into use when implementing policy.

Arguably, the politics of use perspective is particularly fruitful for analyzing policy implementation in authoritarian contexts, as these contexts typically have one single strong actor, or group of actors, who have the power to override institutional structures and impinge on organizational autonomy. However, hegemonic actors do not necessarily have to be the state, or the central government. Theoretically, any actors should be considered who succeed in establishing ideological regimes with penetrating power: regimes of thought that can connect directly with street-level actors, and that are capable of at least partially neutralizing the institutional logic of the school and/or the education system. By broadening the potential types of actors in a politics of use approach, the political in the sense of government or party politics is expanded to also include other struggles over power and values. A politics of use perspective becomes thus reconcilable with e.g. approaches using a governmentality framework, in which hegemonic actors materialize in the form of new accountability regimes (Niesche, 2013) or other 'dominant or hegemonic modes of thought, such as neoliberalism' (Bailey, 2015, p. 234).

What sets a politics of use perspective apart from related approaches is its integration of the macro and the micro in everyday policy implementation. It focuses on how teachers, through

applying policy means and goals, realize and generate political values that connect directly to the larger political environment, and thus reveals how teachers do not only cope with political directives but are also complicit in co-constructing macropolitics on the ground.

Notes

1. I am grateful to my economist-colleague Stefan Brehm, who initially brought up this term (if with somewhat different implications) within our research project on the digital society in China.
2. Currently, the OECD is developing a framework for assessing creative and critical thinking skills in education that is to be incorporated into the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2021. It remains to be seen how this framework will succeed in capturing creativity at the school level.
3. 'Innovation' (*chuangxin*; literally: to create something new) is a widely used term in Chinese society, and both in Chinese policy papers and in everyday parlance at the schools, it is more common to refer to 'innovation' than to 'creativity' (*chuangyi*; literally: to create ideas), also in situations where English speakers would tend to use the latter.
4. All empirical data are in Chinese (Mandarin), and direct quotations have been translated by the author.
5. While in this strand of research, educational borrowing has been mainly understood as taking place across national frontiers, the 'outside' may in fact also lie within the nation-state, such as educators borrowing from the field of economics (think e.g. of New Public Management strategies within the educational sector). One of the earliest educational researchers to point to the importance of the 'Other', or foreign countries, as a source of legitimacy in domestic debates, was Zymek (1975).
6. This non-use is also true for the various school exhibitions or school museums that many schools feature, officially to enable learning that is not textbook-based.

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