

Interpretation and Translation: How an Education Policy Is Distorted and Reoriented by Official Education Systems

Hao Chen

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1549-6259>

Jiangsu University of Technology, China

chenhao@jsut.edu.cn

Abstract

From the Bernsteinian perspective, education policy interpretation and translation, as a process of recontextualising policy discourse into proposed pedagogic modes, follow certain regulative discourses and rules of social orders. This study illustrates this argument by investigating 15 discipline heads' experiences concerning their exposure to the interpretation and translation of the higher vocational education curriculum reform policy in China. The policy emphasised industry-led curricula, which is opposite to the general regulative discourse of state dominance in the Chinese education system. Given this contradiction, the government and its vocational colleges attempted to find a compromise, and thus their agents interpreted and translated the policy discourse into regionalised modes where the official education system could still control knowledge selection with limited influence from employers. It is argued that the regulative discourse in an education policy originating in realistic and economic considerations might be contrary to the general regulative discourse in official education systems, so that the policy could not be faithfully interpreted based on its own regulative discourse but had to be interpreted by largely following the general regulative discourse that is opposed to that of the policy. Thus, the policy was distorted and reoriented into a pedagogic mode that diverges from the aim of the policy.

Keywords: Bernstein; vocational education; curriculum; education policy; China



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Introduction

Education policy documents cannot be understood on their own (Ball 1993) because they are usually abstract and contain generalised directives, which are distant from teachers' contextualised educational practices. Education policies enacted by the central or local governments include a collection of directives and rules used to govern, regulate, and change the operation of educational practices such as curriculum reform or new education programmes (Bell and Stevenson 2006; Haddad and Demsky 1995; Fullan 2007). However, "policies do not normally tell you what to do" (Ball 1993, 12), and the lack of a clear and detailed explanation as to how to implement reform could be attributed to the important reason that policies contain the meanings of changing educational practices in a country and/or state; therefore, they must be abstract and cannot be specified in a context (Ball 1993). Consequently, there is a discursive gap in meaning between policy directives and teachers' contextualised practices (Bernstein 2000; Spratt 2017).

Policy interpretation and translation involve discursive communities that narrow the gap between policies and teachers' contextualised practices by distributing, relocating, and contextualising policy discourses in a specific context (Spratt 2017). Interpretation and translation are usually provided by policy interpreters (e.g. school managers, local authority advisors, and senior teachers) and are presented in specific contexts, including official reports, schools, and in-service training (Ball et al. 2011). Ball, Maguire, and Braun (2012) explain:

Interpretation is an engagement with the languages of policy, whereas translation is closer to the languages of practice. Translation is a sort of third space between policy and practice. It is an iterative process of making institutional texts and putting those texts into action, literally enacting policy using tactics. (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012, 45)

In many cases, interpretation and translation occur simultaneously and are "closely interwoven and over-lapping" (Ball et al. 2011, 621). Policy interpretation and translation also refer to policy interpreters' positions and policy practices, which specify their influence on the formation of policy interpretation and translation (Ball et al. 2011).

Policy interpretation and translation involve more than an accumulation of individual and subjective meanings but rather are bound to social, cultural, and historical conditions (Bacchi 2000). The extant literature emphasises the need to investigate how culture, educational ideas, social structures, and moral standards—through policy interpreters' interpretation and translation—influence or shape the education policy discourse (Bacchi 2000; Grimaldi 2012). Singh, Thomas, and Harris (2013) regard Bernstein's sociology theory as appropriate for analysing the rules of social order shaping policy interpretation and translation, and they are usually linked to power relations and social structures (Kwok 2023). The current research inherits this social

approach to investigating Chinese higher vocational education (HVE) curriculum reform policy interpretation and translation.

Vocational Education Curriculum Reform

Globally, economic considerations drive vocational education to develop curricula and programmes in response to local market needs (Gill, Dar, and Fluitman 1999; OECD 2012). In recent decades, discipline-based curricula have been replaced by curricula based on industry skill standards in many Western countries (Young 2006). With skill requirements, work-based knowledge and practice learning such as doing industrial tasks and projects have been introduced into the vocational education curricula (Boreham 2004; Young 2006). Since the 1980s, competency-based education has gradually been adopted in many Anglophone countries and regions, such as England and Australia (Wheelahan 2007). Curriculum development is based on competencies needed by the industry; this is known as the “vocationalisation” of the curricula. In Germany, the dual system has a long-standing tradition and is carried out parallel in workplaces and vocational schools to facilitate a smooth transition for young people from school to work (Deissinger 2015). Since some reform initiatives in the 1990s, German vocational education and training has turned competency-based and work-oriented (Gessler 2017). The education goal has become oriented to the actual work requirements defined by the industry and fostering people’s labour capability. To further respond to work requirements and abandon disciplinary logic and structures of curricula in vocational education schools, the concept of areas of learning was introduced in 1996, and thus curricula have been mainly organised with work-related activities and learning (Gessler 2017). On the one hand, generally, competency-based curricula lack the system of disciplinary knowledge, and a small amount of knowledge that relates to context-dependent practice is kept and embedded in the units of competency-based learning (Wheelahan 2007). On the other hand, both Clarke, Winch, and Brockmann (2013) and Wheelahan (2007) recognise the importance of disciplinary knowledge in enhancing labour capability, and criticise skill-based vocational education and training in England and Australia. However, the industry pays much more attention to competency standards than knowledge. Nonetheless, vocational education with state dominance tends to include more theoretical knowledge components and low practice-learning, as is the case in France (Pilz 2016).

In the literature, there are different ways to define competencies in vocational education among countries (Brockmann et al. 2011); nevertheless, a common principle of competency-based education across countries is making school curricula and workplace learning respond to “national industry competency or occupational standards” (Misko 2006, 34). Competencies in England and other Anglophone countries are linked much more to skills defined as the performance of activities in the workplace, while competencies in German go “beyond mastery of a technique related to task performance and extend to a grasp of the requirements of the occupation as a whole” (Clarke, Winch, and Brockmann 2013, 935), not just handling tasks independently but also applying self-

talents and social ability in the workplace (Gessler 2017). In spite of the difference, competencies are employment-responsive, and defined by the industry (Wheelahan 2007).

Since the 1980s, market economies have mushroomed in China, and vocational education is expected to foster the development of manual or practical skills to enhance economic development (State Council 2002). Two levels of vocational education are recognised in China: secondary and higher (MoE 2019). Higher vocational colleges, most of which are public and offer diploma-based programmes to train highly skilled personnel, are the main providers of HVE (Guo and Lamb 2010). In 2006, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) issued a policy that promoted HVE curriculum reform in response to industrial needs (Bao 2012). The background to the reform was that the traditional and discipline-based approach to vocational education had long been predominant in China, with most teachers having limited industrial experience (Bao 2012). Students were thus equipped with theoretical knowledge and did not meet the skill requirements of booming enterprises in the expanding Chinese market economy. HVE curriculum reform in China aims to foster highly skilled labour by redeveloping HVE provider curricula in response to industry needs (Mi and Wu 2009). The thrust of the curriculum policy reform was clearly defined as follows:

HVE ... aims to foster the highly skilled manpower needed by the frontline of the manufacturing, construction, service, and management industry. ... One important feature of HVE is adjusting and setting disciplines based on the needs of local economic development. ... Higher vocational colleges should actively cooperate with sectors and enterprises to develop curricula. Curriculum development should be based on job requirements. (MoE 2006)

Since 2006, curriculum reform and development in response to the industry needs has been an important principle for facilitating skill cultivation (Bao 2012). It was seen as challenging to promote the reform in practice, because such change needs new strategies for curriculum development, increasing funds, and more teachers with industry experience (Bao 2012).

Knowledge, Recontextualisation, and Curriculum Modes

Bernstein's pedagogic device contains three main fields that describe the transmission of knowledge: the production, recontextualisation, and reproduction of knowledge (Bernstein 2000, 1990). These fields are regarded as hierarchically related in that knowledge from the production field is recontextualised into contextualised curricula (Singh 2002). In addition, his theory is regarded as providing a framework for classifying curriculum modes (Bernstein 2000).

In both simple and complex societies, there are at least two classes of knowledge: esoteric and mundane (Bernstein 2000, 1990). In modern society, esoteric knowledge is theoretical and disciplinary and mainly originates in the intellectual field. The body of

knowledge of a discipline has few references to other forms of knowledge and has no direct relationship with everyday life. Disciplinary knowledge is a vertical discourse that “takes the form of a coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure” (Bernstein 2000, 157). In contrast, mundane knowledge is classified as everyday or “common sense” knowledge, which is “bound to specific practices and contexts” (Nylund and Rosvall 2016, 696). It is a horizontal discourse that “entails a set of strategies which are local, segmentally organised, context specific and dependent, for maximising encounters with persons and habitats” (Bernstein 2000, 157). A horizontal discourse cannot be related to another by integrating its meaning because it is always related to segmental and specific contexts. Many vocational education researchers regard practice and work-related knowledge that is related to performing a specific task as a horizontal discourse (Nylund and Rosvall 2016; Young 2006).

The recontextualising process of knowledge follows a pedagogic discourse “by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for the purpose of their selective transmission and acquisition” (Bernstein 2000, 32). In other words, pedagogic discourse is regarded as a recontextualising principle for the selection and organisation of knowledge. It embeds two types of discourses: instructional and regulative discourse (Bernstein 2000, 1990). Instructional discourse refers to knowledge in curricula and its organisation and selection. Regulative discourse concerns character, manner, conduct, and the rules of social order, including “the imagined model of the teacher, learner and pedagogic context discursively constructed by the policy actors” (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013, 469), and regulates the selection and organisation of knowledge in curricula. The regulative discourse dominates the recontextualising process because it regulates the instructional discourse or the instructional discourse is embedded in it. Moreover, some of the regulative discourse appears more general and contains rules and relations among the state, education, and industry, which Neves and Morais (2001) call the general regulative discourse usually enacted in law. “The state functions at the generative level to legitimise the principles of distribution of social power and control which are incorporated in official pedagogic discourse” (Neves and Morais 2001, 225). For example, a general regulative discourse enacted in law could be that the government takes charge of managing the education system or that the industry plays a key role in regulating education rather than the government.

Bernstein (2000) proposes the performance modes of pedagogic discourse and practice, stating “we now consider the move to performance models and their modes in respect of the recontextualising process whereby these models and modes are imaginatively constructed into pedagogic discourses and practices” (2000, 60). These modes include singular, regionalised, and generic modes of curricula, and Wheelahan (2007), from the Bernsteinian perspective, also describes the competency-based curriculum mode in vocational education. Besides the specific class of knowledge in each curriculum mode (Hordern 2019; McPhail 2012), each mode also contains a pedagogic discourse where a certain regulative discourse dominates and regulates the selection and organisation of

curriculum knowledge. The regulative discourse of singular modes centres on cultivating knowledgeable and informed people in a specific disciplinary field (McLean, Abbas, and Ashwin 2013), which indicates the intellectual field defines disciplinary knowledge as valid and the people who acquire that knowledge as educated. Disciplinary knowledge is a vertical discourse with an introjected identity that is strongly insulated from other knowledge, and the translation of power relies on the strength of the insulation (Bernstein 2000, 1990). The strong insulation and boundary of disciplinary knowledge indicate the power of the intellectual field to define valid knowledge in curricula.

The “regionalised curriculum” (Annala 2022, 1099) that emphasises the practical application of theories is usually adopted to cultivate professionals in higher education. Based on this regulative discourse, knowledge selection responds not only to the needs of education systems, especially the intellectual field, but also to external influences, such as employers (Hordern 2019). Thus, its knowledge is the recontextualisation of “singulars into larger bodies of knowledge produced in both the intellectual field and the field of external practice” (Bernstein 2000, 52). Unlike the vertical discourse, practical knowledge as a horizontal discourse lacks co-ordinating principles and structures to integrate its meaning, and is always related to segmental and specific contexts (Bernstein 2000). In regionalised modes, introducing practice into singular curricula means weakening strong disciplinary boundaries and knowledge structures (Annala 2022). This is equivalent to weakening the power of the intellectual field to define valid knowledge in curricula. In regionalised modes, curricula may adopt more singular characteristics if governments “attempt to preserve and sustain a disciplinary academic tradition” (Hordern 2019, 121). However, for new regions (e.g. business disciplines), knowledge is more likely to be the projection of practice (Bernstein 2000).

The generic mode does not share a disciplinary orientation like singular or regionalised modes, but organises knowledge and activities of learning under the interests of the market (Hordern 2019). This mode is first expressed in the competency-based education and training (Jones and Moore 1995; Wheelahan 2010) and is “produced by a functional analysis” of “the underlying features necessary to the performance of a skill, task, practice or even area of work” (Bernstein 2000, 53). Rather than directly focusing on specific performances, this mode is expected to foster a transferable potential (Bernstein 2000), such as generic competencies in vocational education (Wheelahan 2010).

For a competency-based curriculum, its regulative discourse is industry-led and focuses on cultivating the employability and industry-led skills of graduates in vocational and higher education (Wheelahan and Moodie 2021). It may refer to cultivating generic skills related to the workplace but must be responsive to “descriptions of the skills needed by employers” (Wheelahan 2007, 645). Being responsive to the industry means the industry’s control over knowledge selection and practice (horizontal discourse) is seen as replacing disciplinary knowledge so disciplinary curricula with its disciplinary boundaries and knowledge structures are fully abandoned. The competency-based

curriculum “fundamentally transforms the nature of knowledge by delocating it from the vertical discourse in which it classified and relocating it closer (if not completely) towards horizontal discourse” (Wheelahan 2007, 648). Thus, students are deprived of access to the system of disciplinary knowledge, and only a small amount of knowledge derived from disciplinary knowledge is recontextualised into much more context-dependent knowledge to be linked to particular practice (Wheelahan 2007).

According to Bernstein’s theory, it appears that the regulative discourse of industry dominance highlighted in the HVE curriculum policy in the current research is opposite to the general regulative discourse of state dominance in law in China. On the one hand, in the policy, curricula in response to industry needs and fostering skilled people are seen as a regulative discourse, as is common in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany as well. As Misko explains:

Industry is responsible for identifying national competency standards in Australia, occupational standards in the United Kingdom and occupational profiles in Germany. These standards then establish guidance for the delivery of training and the awarding of qualifications. (Misko 2006, 7)

The regulative discourse of industry dominance is related to the neoliberal and free market ideology that “the free market is somehow natural and its effects intrinsically reasonable and just” (Jones and Moore 1995, 86), and the provision of vocational education is “directly linked to instrumentalities of the market” (Bernstein 2000, 55), and free from state dominance. The industry dominance regulative discourse is realised in the form of competency-based curricula (Jones and Moore 1995) where curriculum knowledge and objectives are selected and defined by the industry. On the other hand, according to Vocational Education Law of the People’s Republic of China in 1996, the general regulative discourse is state dominance:

Vocational education is an important component of the educational undertakings of the State. ... Vocational education shall follow the state’s educational policy. ... The education administrative department of the State Council shall be responsible for the overall planning, comprehensive coordination and macro-control of vocational education. (MoE 2009b)

Chinese vocational education is dominated by the state (Pilz 2016); the government, especially the Ministry of Education (MoE), is responsible for enacting vocational education regulations and policies as well as managing and evaluating vocational education. Vocational education, including HVE, is part of governmental education systems regulated by the MoE. In fact, compared with the vocational education systems in Germany and Australia where the official education department follows the guidance of trade unions and employers’ associations to establish training regulations and occupational standards, there is “an absence of sufficient systemic responses at central, provincial or municipal government levels” (Li and Sheldon 2014, 323–324) to industry needs in China. Chinese HVE adopted singular modes as the reproduction field of higher

education before the curriculum reform policy, and both HVE and higher education are directed and managed by the MoE and Chinese government (MoE 2009a). Thus, the selection of curriculum knowledge was previously exclusively controlled by the officially directed education system, which was commensurate with the state-dominance regulative discourse. However, according to the Chinese HVE curriculum reform policy, curricula are required to change from state dominance to industry dominance.

Curriculum Policy Interpretation and Translation as Recontextualisation

The concept of recontextualisation was regarded as providing an analytical tool to analyse policy interpretation and translation as a process of elaborating and re-ordering condensed policy discourse into imagined teachers' educational practices (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). More specifically, the interpretation and translation of policy texts into the proposed educational practice follow the recontextualising principle that the instructional discourse is embedded in the regulative discourse. The regulative discourse dominates and regulates the instructional discourse that is a technical discourse about morphing and mutating policy texts into practice (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013). There are two recontextualising fields: the official recontextualising field (ORF) and the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF). The ORF is created and dominated by governments and their selected agents and ministries, and is the official site of the production of policy texts and official guidance that regulates pedagogic practice (Bernstein 2000). The PRF is composed of school managers, senior teachers, and university academics, among others (Kwok 2023). With respect to mandated policies, any re-organisation, selection, or elaboration of policy discourse in the PRF is expected to be consistent with the ORF. Otherwise, "autonomy and struggles over pedagogic texts and practices occur within the PRFs, and between this field and the ORF" (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013, 468).

A curriculum policy text could be interpreted and translated into proposed curriculum modes; that is, during the process, educational authorities and agents create, choose, and even utilise a specific pedagogic discourse or curriculum mode that regulates how knowledge from the production field is selected into curricula in school (Bernstein 2000, 1990). Bernstein argues: "The recontextualising principle not only selects the what but also the how of the theory of instruction" (2000, 35), and the selection of curriculum modes and related approaches must follow certain regulative discourses. In this article, the HVE reform in China aims to foster highly skilled labour by redeveloping curricula in response to industry needs. The regulative discourse indicates that curriculum development should serve economic goals and cultivate skilled manpower. Although the curriculum policy does not specify any curriculum theory or mode, it explicitly presented its regulative discourse. Both regionalised and competency-based modes refer to economic considerations (Bernstein 2000). However, it appears that, compared with regionalised modes emphasising linking theoretical knowledge to practice, the competency-based mode better meets that regulative discourse in the policy because it

exclusively responds to industry needs and skill cultivation. Competency-based education is widely used in industry-based vocational education in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Australia (Misko 2006). From ORF to PRF in terms of the Chinese HVE curriculum reform policy, there was a discursive space for policy interpreters to shape or choose certain modes. Specifically, their role was to interpret and translate the regulative discourse in the policy into proposed curricula, which inevitably involved selecting curriculum modes.

Obviously, policy interpreters' selection of curriculum modes during their interpretation and translation of the Chinese HVE curriculum policy might change singular modes previously advocated in Chinese HVE, and more importantly, change power and control related to the mode. Singh, Thomas, and Harris (2013) argue that the interpretation and translation work brings changes to the policy discourse and related power and control relations. The shift from singular to regionalised modes means weakening rather than abandoning traditional and singular curricula and introducing practice. In this case, both education systems directed by governments and the industry would have control over knowledge selection. In competency-based curricula, disciplinary-based curricula would be abandoned, and the intellectual field and governments would lose their power to define valid knowledge and their control over the selection of knowledge.

The Study

The present study conducted by the author investigated 15 discipline heads' relevant experience of exposure to HVE curriculum reform policy interpretation and translation. Discipline heads are regarded as taking charge of curriculum development and reform at the discipline level in higher vocational colleges in China (Bao 2012). An interview instrument provides an appropriate way to access accounts of people's experiences (Van Manen 1990). Through in-depth interviews, the participants are given an opportunity to tell their stories, express their perceptions, and reflect their experiences of a certain phenomenon in depth (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). A total of 15 discipline heads were selected from two colleges in the chosen city in Eastern China: seven from College One and eight from College Two. To protect their anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym: Cong, Dui, Fang, Gong, Heng, Hui, Ruo, Sei, Sun, Wen, Xiao, Xing, Yan, Zhong, and Zhuo. Gong, Ruo, Sun, and Xing are female, while the others are male. Cong, Gong, Heng, Hui, Sei, Sun, and Zhong were from College One and the others were from College Two. All of them had bachelor's or master's degrees, and only Cong, Ruo, Sei, and Zhuo worked as a full-time professional before becoming HVE teaching staff.

Two Different Curriculum Modes Proposed in Policy Interpretation and Translation

The analysis of the participants' reports indicated that despite interpreting and translating the same curriculum policy, two different modes of curricula were proposed in the ORF and PRF, regionalised and competency-based modes. The former

emphasised the importance of both theory and practice in fostering students, and weakened but not completely abandoned disciplinary curriculum and knowledge structures or noted the arrangement of traditional and theoretical courses in a discipline (Annala 2022). The regionalised mode was regarded as being advocated and dominant in the ORF and the PRF. Meanwhile, the competency-based mode also emerged but not often. In this study, the mode was only piloted in one discipline in College Two, while the other disciplines in the two selected colleges adopted regionalised modes as the government advocated. It appears that the official and collegial selection of regionalised modes was an effort to respond to both the general regulative discourse of state dominance in law and the industry dominance regulative discourse highlighted in the policy.

Policy interpretation and translation are regarded as recontextualising an abstract and inexplicit policy discourse into “an imagined logic of teachers’ practical work” (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013, 477). According to all the participants, the HVE curriculum reform policy discourse was abstract and incomprehensive, but the policy interpretation and translation they encountered were an attempt to link the policy to the proposed curricula. A participant explains:

The government and the college raised that curriculum should respond to industry needs. That was a concept. We [I and other teachers] did not know how to realise it. ... Some external education experts brought some ideas, containing a very particular implementing approach ... not only studying theories but also learning practical skills.
(Wen)

The Chinese government and its selected agents and ministries that formed the official recontextualising field (ORF) was regarded by eight participants as playing a role in interpreting and translating the curriculum reform policy. However, most teaching staff could not be immediately exposed to it after the announcement of the policy. On the one hand, official continuing professional development programmes for teachers included policy interpretation and translation. Heng states:

I think that the country made many efforts to provide guidelines on policy implementation, including the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance ... such as national and provincial teacher professional development programmes, which are sponsored by either the country or province. They are usually in summer vacation, and I attended one before.

On the other hand, opportunities to attend official programmes were limited, and most teaching staff had no immediate opportunities to participate in them after the policy was announced. Hui says:

Every year, only a few teaching staff were sent to attend national or provincial training.

Policy interpretation and translation can also take the form of educational artefacts (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Four participants mentioned that the government gradually posted online cases of the reform of a curriculum or a single course as guidance, and these cases were officially rewarded and recognised as examples of “excellent” implementation of the reform. Zhong mentions that this occurred gradually after the policy announcement:

There are some emerging courses and HVE curricula. In fact, there is a website listing courses that are officially rated as “Excellent Course” and demonstrate how such a course was reformed.

All the participants’ accounts also showed different forms of policy interpretation and translation in the PRF, which were provided by vocational education experts invited by their colleges and the middle management or through educational materials. Xing provides an example:

For the purpose of promoting curriculum reform, the college invited some experts, including some experts from the university, who gave a presentation in seminars. I got some sense of how others reformed their curricula.

Yan’s dean supervised him based on his concrete challenges in the reform:

I admired my dean because he/she really had a good understanding of the policy. ... When we [I and other teachers] got stuck concerning how to proceed with our curriculum reform, he/she pointed out how to do it. (Yan)

Sun reviewed other educators’ teaching materials for reference, and states:

In terms of the development of courses in my disciplinary field, through reviewing the introduction of the development of a course in another disciplinary field in PowerPoints, I then learnt their strategies.

The following section shows that through the analysis of the participants’ accounts of policy interpretation and translation in the ORF and PRF, two proposed curricula, belonging to regionalised and competency-based modes, were identified. According to the analysis, one proposed curriculum approach—the integration of theory and practice—was promoted in policy interpretation and translation. This approach was similar to the regionalised mode proposed by Bernstein, that is, “recontextualising singulars into larger units which operate both in the intellectual field of disciplines and in the field of external practice” (Bernstein 2000, 52), and is aimed at fostering professionals who can link theories with practice. Heng asserts:

Our HVE began to promote that teaching was required to change from purely theory dominance to theories plus practice ... a curriculum by integrating theory and practice. ... That was to increase the ratio of practice in previous courses ... applying theoretical knowledge to practice in the workplace.

Heng's statement shows that the regulative discourse of the new approach was more likely to respond to the needs of both the intellectual field and industrial practice in selecting valid knowledge and fostering individuals, which is similar to regionalised modes. The selection of knowledge in this proposed curriculum would be influenced by not only the Chinese education system, especially the intellectual field, but also by industrial practice.

A further analysis of Heng's reports shows that the proposed integration of theory and practice involved introducing practice into many previous courses and increasing practice learning without completely abandoning disciplinary knowledge and curriculum structures, which belonged to regionalised modes. The regionalisation of singulars results in weakening the strength value of the boundaries of discipline-based curricula and disciplinary knowledge structures to different degrees (Annala 2022; McPhail 2012; Ulriksen, Holmegaard, and Madsen 2017). This is because the newly proposed curriculum boundaries and structures are not only defined by the remaining disciplinary knowledge but also by newly introduced industrial practices (the horizontal discourse). However, disciplinary knowledge structures are weakened rather than totally abandoned (Annala 2022) and can be largely maintained. Similarly, Zhuo highlights that disciplinary structures remain, to a large extent, as proposed in the integration of theory and practice, by illustrating the proposed curriculum (regionalised modes) in comparison with the competency-based mode. Zhuo explains:

The curriculum reform mode promoted in our country is different from the German one. There are still many theoretical courses. ... The mode does not require abandoning the arrangement of traditional courses.

The regionalised mode, the integration of theory and practice as the approach to reforming curricula in China, was regarded by all the participants as being promoted and dominant in the ORF and the PRF. Hui states:

We called [the approach] the combination of teaching and practice or the integration of theory and practice. ... This is a new external requirement for me. Otherwise, how can I know this new approach? This is the college-based requirement that was promoted in the meeting, and also from some national and provincial training.

In addition, it appears that the government promoted this mode by officially advocating and recognising curricula using this approach. According to Zhong,

The national "Excellent Course" required the integration of theory and practice. That approach is the trend!

The above reports demonstrated that the regionalised mode (the integration of theory and practice) was officially advocated and recognised, and also became a college-based regulation, thus illustrating the national and college-based dominance of it.

Ruo and Zhuo are from different disciplines but the same department in College Two, and based on the analysis of their accounts, in the PRF, their department management and its invited German experts advocated the competency-based mode, which they named the “German curriculum mode”. More specifically, their department piloted the German mode under the supervision of these experts in Ruos disciplinary field, which was just the second pilot in their province. Ruos mentions,

In my city, there are many German-invested companies, and the reform pilot was implemented with the help of the German Chamber in China. In this region, this is the second pilot. ... The German experts proposed requirements to us, and also supervised us. We learnt their vocational education and their curriculum outline and then reformed our curriculum.

Its regulative discourse is fostering industry-led skills, and practice (horizontal discourse) is dominant. This was evident in Zhuos reports concerning the German mode. According to Zhuo,

The German mode focuses on practice and skills instead of the delivery of disciplinary knowledge.

Similar to the competency-based mode, the boundary of a discipline and its theoretical course arrangement were regarded by Ruos as being abandoned. Ruos claims:

In fact, the reform was extensive and huge. The arrangement of previous courses was totally abandoned, and we were required to fully follow the German one. From my understanding, their curriculum outline is a process of skill cultivation and emphasises the alternation of work and learning. There is no course, only what projects and tasks students should finish each week.

Ruos adds that a small amount of knowledge was kept and required to be “embedded into projects”. The nature of the knowledge derived from the system of disciplinary knowledge when being introduced into work-related contexts has been changed from vertical discourse towards horizontal discourse (Wheelahan 2007).

In general, the dominant interpretation and translation of the curriculum reform policy in the ORF and PRF were based on both the general regulative discourse of state dominance in law and the industry dominance regulative discourse highlighted in the policy, and thus proposed a compromised curriculum belonging to regionalised modes. During the interpretation and translation of a policy, reorganisations, selections, and elaborations of policy discourse follow one or even more regulative discourses referring to social orders about “what knowledge is selected and how it is organised to produce selective orientations to meaning” (Singh, Thomas, and Harris 2013, 469). Thus, based on one or more particular regulative discourses, a policy text may be interpreted and translated into a proposed pedagogic mode. More specifically, in this article, the response to the industry needs was the regulative discourse in the HVE curriculum

policy in China, which is contrary to the general regulative discourse of state dominance in law in China. Merely following the industry dominance regulative discourse would mean policy interpreters have to propose industry-led and competency-based curricula where the industry has control over the selection of practice as curriculum knowledge, which is opposite to the general regulative discourse. On the other hand, only following the general regulative discourse of state dominance means policy interpreters still have to propose disciplinary curricula where the education system, especially the intellectual field, exclusively has control over the selection of disciplinary knowledge. However, Hordern (2019) regards the regionalised mode as being aligned with both regulative discourses to some extent, because it refers to the selection of both disciplinary knowledge and practice under the control of not only official education systems but also employers. In this research, it is argued that by considering both the state-dominance regulative discourse in law and the industry dominance regulative discourse in the policy, policy interpreters as agents of the government and its colleges advocated the curriculum approach named the integration of theory and practice in the ORF and PRF, which belonged to regionalised modes. Hence, arbitrarily creating and proposing this approach meant the selection of regionalised modes in policy interpretation and translation, which could be commensurate with both the regulative discourses of state dominance and industry needs to some degree. In other words, adopting regionalised modes was a compromise under these two conflicting regulative discourses.

A similar viewpoint could be derived from the participant Ruo who pointed out that the reason why the government chose regionalised modes over the competency-based one is because the adoption of the latter would not meet state dominance and would make the government lose its power to define valid knowledge and control over the selection of knowledge in HVE curricula. Ruo says:

I think the German dual system is really suitable for our vocational education. However, it is extremely challenging to promote it in China. ... It is the issue of benefits. In fact, in terms of the field of vocational education, it is about who is the leader, right? [The government] should give up its benefits. ... [On the other hand] I think the integration of theory and practice does not very much focus on practical operations ... [still] following a disciplinary and hierarchical structure.

Meanwhile, it appears that the integration of theory and practice in China, as regionalised modes, could meet state dominance and sustain official power and control in HVE to a large extent. During the regionalising of disciplinary curricula, if a government attempts “to preserve and sustain a disciplinary academic tradition” (Hordern 2019, 121), education systems might still exert strong control over the selection of knowledge in curricula with a limited external influence, such as employers, thereby resulting in more disciplinary knowledge rather than practice (Hordern 2019). In fact, the involvement of industry in HVE is limited because there is no systemic collaboration and communication between the industry and HVE in China (Li and Sheldon 2014).

Conclusions

In this article, Bernstein's theory has been used as a tool to prove that an education policy can be distorted and reoriented during policy interpretation and translation by official education systems. As Singh, Thomas, and Harris (2013) argue, from the Bernsteinian perspective, policy interpretation and translation, as a process of recontextualising policy discourse into proposed pedagogic modes, follow certain regulative discourses. This argument is extended by the current research by illustrating that if the regulative discourse of an education policy with its related ideology and pedagogic modes is opposite to the general regulative discourse espoused by governments and related rules of social orders in education systems, the policy discourse is not only recontextualised based on its regulative discourse, but also recontextualised, distorted, and re-oriented by following the general regulative discourse. A compromised pedagogic mode is proposed in the ORF and PRF in an attempt to reconcile two conflicting regulative discourses; however, the mode inevitably deviates from the aim of the policy. A more specific case is that the regulative discourse of an education policy based on economic considerations and the ideology of free markets might be opposite to the general regulative discourse of state dominance espoused by some governments. To be compatible with state dominance and avoid major changes to the rule of social orders in education systems, the recontextualising process of a policy could be completely controlled by the government with its directly managed education providers, and would thus follow both the general regulative discourse and the policy one to propose a compromised pedagogic mode. In other words, the current research indicates that an education policy cannot be faithfully interpreted and translated in an education system based on a general regulative discourse that conflicts with the policy. Furthermore, even if an education policy focuses on changes to educational practice, it may still involve checking and building rules of social order in education systems to be commensurate with the policy.

The key to research on the work of policy interpretation and translation is to investigate not only who takes responsibility for this work but more importantly what regulative discourse they follow, because the regulative discourse and related rules of social order and ideologies determine the orientations of policy recontextualisation. A policy interpreter's work is more likely to be a mouthpiece for certain ideologies, rules of social order, and regulative discourse with related pedagogic modes than their individual and subjective meanings. According to the government requirement, the colleges' work on policy interpretation and translation was aligned with the regulative discourses of both state and industry dominance, rather than advocating their own preferences. In other words, the colleges were considered little more than a convenient mouthpiece for the government and its policies. Similarly, German experts, as policy interpreters, were more likely to be agents of the industry dominance regulative discourse under the ideology of free markets.

Bernstein's concept of pedagogic modes is a useful tool for analysing pedagogic and curriculum modes as well as the power and control relations they entail. It contributes to identifying and comparing curricula in terms of what is promoted in policies and what is implemented in practice and between countries, and revealing what political and social conditions cause the divergences or differences. A curriculum approach or mode, even an arbitrary one, always refers to strategies and tactics (Ball et al. 2011) concerning the selection and organisation of knowledge, and such an instructional and technical discourse is always embedded in one or more regulative discourses. By analysing curriculum knowledge and its regulative discourse, curricula can be classified into singular, regionalised, generic or competency-based modes. This analysis helps to reveal whether there is a disjuncture between curricula promoted in a policy and that advocated in educational practice, and to compare curriculum modes across countries. The analysis of the dominant curriculum mode reveals the rules of social order in education systems, referring to who controls the selection of knowledge and who has the power to define it.

The findings in this research reveal a deficit in many vocational education studies that have wrongly attributed the failure of skill formation in many countries to the incapability of vocational education implementers because these researchers get trapped in the disputed assumption that a government must have an overarching concern with skill formation. Unfortunately, many governments with strong state dominance prioritise their powers and controls, so they may prohibit extensive industry involvement and do not adopt industry-led and competency-based curriculum modes, which results in undermining skill formation. The German dual training system associated with its curricula was regarded as good practice of skill formation, and from the historical and political perspective one important condition for its success is attributed to industry involvement in decision-making such as defining competency standards and regulating training (Gessler 2017). However, such values and regulative discourse are contrary to the state-dominance regulative discourse in the Chinese education system, so the dual system could not be promoted nationwide.

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