



Curriculum as a Governing Practice: Thomas S. Popkewitz's Perspective

Yi-Huang Shih

Center of Teacher Education, Minghsin University of Science and Technology, Hsinchu, Taiwan

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Published Online: 12 December 2025	Thomas S. Popkewitz is particularly concerned with how the construction of knowledge is intertwined with mechanisms of power, producing disciplinary and exclusionary effects within educational practice. He argues that education is never a neutral space for knowledge transmission; rather, it operates through a series of institutional practices and discursive constructions that shape subjectivities, classify differences, and reproduce social order. In the field of curriculum theory, Popkewitz offers a thought-provoking perspective on the “postmodern historiography of curriculum,” challenging traditional historical narratives centered on linear progress and rational development. He contends that it is essential to uncover the cultural-political logic embedded in curriculum reforms, particularly how these reforms define certain forms of knowledge, behavior, and subjectivity as “normal” or “ideal” educational goals. Through this lens, Popkewitz conceptualizes curriculum as a cultural-political practice and emphasizes the need to critically reflect on how reform discourses construct “the child who is to be made into a learner,” often marginalizing specific differences. This theoretical approach offers a new perspective for analyzing how educational systems reproduce inequality, while also urging educators and policymakers to reconsider the social and ethical responsibilities of educational change. Popkewitz offers a “governmentality” perspective that reveals the institutional arrangements and modernist logics underlying educational practices. This article aims to examine Popkewitz’s three core arguments on curriculum governance, with the intention
Corresponding Author: Yi-Huang Shih	of fostering a deeper understanding of his conceptualization of curriculum and its underlying principles.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Thomas S. Popkewitz is one of the most influential contemporary scholars in the sociology of education. His work is profoundly inspired by European theorists such as Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jürgen Habermas. Popkewitz is particularly concerned with how the construction of knowledge is intertwined with mechanisms of power, producing disciplinary and exclusionary effects within educational

practice. He argues that education is never a neutral space for knowledge transmission; rather, it operates through a series of institutional practices and discursive constructions that shape subjectivities, classify differences, and reproduce social order. In the field of curriculum theory, Popkewitz offers a thought-provoking perspective on the “postmodern historiography of curriculum,” challenging traditional historical narratives centered on linear progress and rational development. He

contends that it is essential to uncover the cultural-political logic embedded in curriculum reforms, particularly how these reforms define certain forms of knowledge, behavior, and subjectivity as “normal” or “ideal” educational goals. Through this lens, Popkewitz conceptualizes curriculum as a cultural-political practice and emphasizes the need to critically reflect on how reform discourses construct “the child who is to be made into a learner,” often marginalizing specific differences. This theoretical approach offers a new perspective for analyzing how educational systems reproduce inequality, while also urging educators and policymakers to reconsider the social and ethical responsibilities of educational change (Popkewitz, 1991, 2004, 2013).

Moreover, since the 1970s, the field of curriculum studies in the United States has undergone a significant “reconceptualization” shift. This movement no longer regards curriculum as a merely technical tool for instructional design; instead, it views curriculum as a form of knowledge practice deeply embedded in cultural, political, and philosophical meanings. In addition, this primer for prospective and practicing teachers asks students to question the historical present and their relation to it, and in so doing, reflect on their own understandings of what it means to teach, to study, to educate, and to become educated in the present moment in the places we inhabit. Not only the implementation of objectives to be assessed by standardized tests, curriculum is communication among older and younger generations, informed by academic knowledge, and characterized by educational experience. Pinar’s concept of *currere*—the Latin infinitive of curriculum—is invoked to provide an autobiographical method for self-study, enabling both individuals and groups to understand teaching as passionate participation in the complicated conversation that is the curriculum (Pinar, 2019). In contrast to Pinar’s use of *currere* to guide educators in returning to their lived histories and engaging in autobiographical inquiry as a response to contemporary sociocultural conditions, Popkewitz’s curriculum theory focuses on the systems of reason underlying modern educational governance. He reminds us that curriculum is not merely a neutral organization of knowledge or an arrangement of learning experiences; rather, it functions as a set of institutional techniques that produce the “educable subject.”

In other words, practices such as classification, comparison, measurement, and standardization—often perceived as objective and scientific—constitute a particular logic of regulation. Through distinctions between normal and abnormal, success and failure, progress and backwardness, curriculum delineates which kinds of subjects are imagined as “modern” and “governable” within educational systems (Popkewitz, 2008, 2009). From this perspective, Popkewitz’s theory of curriculum as a form of governmentality complements Pinar’s framework of subjective interpretation by enabling curriculum studies to attend simultaneously to how individuals understand the world through curriculum and how institutions shape our imaginations of the self and the other. This analytical lens reframes curriculum not only as experiential narrative or self-understanding, nor merely as a set of teaching methods or assessment procedures, but as a cultural-political technology. Through discursive practices, epistemic forms, and professional languages, curriculum establishes which ways of living are construed as ideal, legitimate, and desirable (Popkewitz, 2013; Zhao & Popkewitz, 2022). Consequently, the fundamental questions of curriculum extend beyond what to teach and how to teach, toward examining who is imagined as educable, redeemable, and able to be incorporated into the nation’s project of governing future citizens. From this vantage point, Pinar and Popkewitz—despite their distinct emphases—converge in highlighting the centrality of subject formation in curriculum studies. Pinar urges educators to engage in reflexive inquiry grounded in their histories, cultures, and lived experiences, whereas Popkewitz exposes the institutional mechanisms that subtly regulate and delimit our educational imaginaries. Their theoretical dialogue enriches curriculum studies with both subjective depth and sociopolitical critique, offering an essential foundation for contemporary educators to reconsider the ethical and political dimensions of curriculum. While Pinar (2019) emphasizes *currere* as a form of self-understanding and the subjective exploration of disciplinary knowledge, Popkewitz offers a “governmentality” perspective that reveals the institutional arrangements and modernist logics underlying educational practices. This article aims to examine Popkewitz’s three core arguments on curriculum governance,

with the intention of fostering a deeper understanding of his conceptualization of curriculum and its underlying principles.

2.THREE CORE ARGUMENTS ON CURRICULUM GOVERNANCE IN POPKEWITZ’S SCHOLARSHIP

2.1 Curriculum as a System of Reason that Produces and Regulates Subjects

The cosmopolitan notions of ‘reason’ and the reasonable person are taken-for-granted as ‘the common sense’ in ordering the sciences of schooling (Popkewitz, 2019). Popkewitz, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of “social alchemy,” questions and critiques postmodern curriculum theories that emphasize processuality, generativity, and the uncertainty of knowledge. From a sociocultural perspective, he seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which school knowledge is formed, examining the relationship between curricular content and broader social structures and forces, as well as how certain forms of knowledge are selected and legitimized for inclusion in the school curriculum. Popkewitz’s perspective on curriculum governance offers an important lens for understanding the modernizing processes of education. He argues that curriculum functions as a “system of reason” that, through classification, standardization, and the construction of difference, renders individuals visible, measurable, and governable. Curriculum is therefore not a neutral instructional plan; rather, it operates as a governing technology that defines how students are expected to think and act. Contemporary educational reforms that emphasize self-regulation, problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability collectively construct the idealized image of the “good student,” guiding learners to internalize particular virtues associated with modern citizenship (Fan, 2023; Popkewitz, 2008, 2011, 2013). However, these curricular constructions of competencies and virtues simultaneously produce classificatory effects. Students become differentiated into categories such as “successful,” “at risk,” or “in need of intervention,” while teachers’ professional judgments are shaped and constrained by policy-driven standardized vocabularies (Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2000). From a governmentality perspective, curriculum not only structures the content of learning but also shapes subjectivity, regulating how teachers and students conduct themselves

within educational settings. This view aligns with Foucault’s (1991) concept of governmentality, highlighting how educational policies and curriculum reforms—often presented under the rhetoric of “improving learning”—in fact constitute subtle and pervasive forms of governing power. Such an analysis illuminates the political and social implications underlying current global educational reforms, including competency-based approaches, standardization, and risk management.

2.2 The Fabrication of Difference through Pedagogical Standards and Expertise

A second core argument concerns the ways pedagogical standards, professional expertise, and assessment practices fabricate social differences under the guise of promoting equity. Popkewitz demonstrates that contemporary reforms frequently emphasize inclusion—whether through multicultural education, learner-centered pedagogy, or competency-based standards—yet these initiatives paradoxically generate new forms of exclusion. Through the deployment of professional vocabularies, child-development taxonomies, and standardized assessment instruments, educational systems produce normative developmental trajectories that implicitly define who counts as an “appropriate” or “successful” learner. Learners who deviate from these projected norms are consequently reclassified as “at risk,” “behind,” or in need of corrective intervention. Popkewitz conceptualizes this dynamic as the subtle “double gestures” of curriculum governance: the simultaneous promise of inclusion and the production of difference through the very mechanisms intended to equalize opportunity (Popkewitz, 2008, 2011, 2013). In this sense, difference is not merely identified but actively fabricated by the epistemic and evaluative frameworks that structure schooling, revealing the governing rationalities embedded within ostensibly progressive educational reforms.

2.3 Curriculum Reform as a Cultural Practice that Constructs Social Imaginaries

Curriculum reform is a significant topic that often involves revising educational programs to better meet the needs of students, address contemporary challenges, and align with educational goals and values. Hence, changing the curriculum

has been viewed as an effective way to change classroom practice and influence student learning to meet the needs of the ever-changing world (Shih, 2025). Popkewitz (2008) emphasizes that curriculum reforms operate as cultural practices embedded within broader historical, political, and social projects. Rather than functioning as neutral or technical adjustments, curriculum reforms articulate normative visions of society, citizenship, and the future through the rationalities of science, psychology, and policy. Whether framed through STEM competencies, neoliberal accountability regimes, or global citizenship education, these reforms project idealized imaginaries of the kinds of citizens schools ought to produce (Popkewitz, 2013). Such imaginaries do not merely remain rhetorical; they materialize through institutional practices, shaping assessment systems, pedagogical expectations, and professional norms that privilege certain dispositions—self-regulation, flexibility, cosmopolitanism—while rendering others less legitimate or thinkable.

3. REFLECTION: LINKING POPKEWITZ’S ARGUMENTS TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN TAIWAN

Inspired by Michel Foucault’s conception of knowledge/power, the American educational scholar Thomas S. Popkewitz developed his own perspective on knowledge inquiry within curriculum studies, thereby establishing a form of social epistemology. In this social epistemology, Popkewitz does not address the content of knowledge per se; rather, he turns his attention to the processes through which knowledge is constituted. He examines the historical, social, and political conditions that shape the formation of disciplinary knowledge, thereby revealing the historically and politically constructed processes underlying educational reforms and policy initiatives (Hung, 2012).

The notion of critique that we engage considers the affective and cognitive structuring of schooling as a material “actor” in the governing of modernity. The art of governing is examined as an infrastructure, the historical and material (re)configuring of differences as a comparative reason fabricating kinds of people.⁴ At the interstices of the Enlightenment, the welfare state, and coloniality that emerged

in the long 19th century and continue today are different settlements in governing the distributions of differences. The governing practices perform as the political through its representation logics and onto-epistemic principles. This logic and principles, we argue, are elided in the critical studies populated in Anglo-American traditions (Popkewitz & Huang, 2023). Reflecting on Popkewitz’s theorization of curriculum as a cultural-political practice provides a useful lens for understanding contemporary educational reforms in Taiwan. The 108 Curriculum Guidelines, with their emphasis on competency-based education, self-directed learning, and global citizenship, similarly construct normative imaginaries of the ideal student (Ministry of Education, 2018, 2019). These curricular rationalities privilege particular dispositions—such as self-regulation, creativity, critical thinking, and cross-cultural communication—that align with globalized discourses of twenty-first-century skills (Popkewitz, 2008, 2013). From Popkewitz’s perspective, such reform agendas are not merely pedagogical improvements; they reflect broader sociopolitical expectations regarding the kinds of citizens Taiwan aims to cultivate. While the reforms highlight equity, innovation, and lifelong learning, they also risk producing new forms of differentiation. For example, students from rural, Indigenous, or socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may find it more challenging to meet the implicit norms of autonomy, linguistic fluency, or cosmopolitan orientation embedded in competency-based standards (Lindblad, S., & Popkewitz, 2000; Shih, 2018a, 2018b, 2020). In this sense, the reform may unintentionally reinforce social stratification under the guise of inclusion—a phenomenon Popkewitz (2011) describes as the “double gestures” of modern curriculum reform. In sum, reflecting through Popkewitz’s lens encourages a more critical reading of Taiwanese educational reforms. It reminds educators and policymakers of the need to balance innovation with attention to cultural diversity, structural inequalities, and the sociopolitical consequences of defining normative educational subjectivities.

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