



## Understanding Educational Leadership and Curriculum Reform: Beyond Global Economism and Neo-Conservative Nationalism

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### Abstract

On a state level both curriculum policy work and educational leadership are increasingly challenged by new transnational phenomena in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas alike: expanding cultural neo-nationalism, more populist politics, economic protectionism, new forms of self-centered identity formation, religious fundamentalism, mistrust in democratic political participation, and decreasing respect for knowledge institutions and established media. These developments have many roots but appear partly as consequences of neoliberally driven policy initiatives and globalization. Consequently, there is increasing mistrust as to whether curriculum, leadership, and evaluation initiatives driven by a global neoliberal policy may provide sustainable solutions for guiding reforms in the public sector, including education. Not surprisingly, also the existing curriculum and educational leadership theory are under scrutiny. This article provides openings pointing to a hermeneutic and systems-oriented, multilevel and professional approach for reorienting national systems with respect to collaborative work on curriculum, leadership, and evaluation. Such a Bildung-centered view on human identity, growth, and citizenship is congruent with a non-affirmative education theory (NAT). It provides a conceptualization that is able to deal with curriculum and leadership genuinely based on an idea of education. Such a position grounds educational leadership, curriculum, and policy work, as well as evaluation and school reform, in education theory. As a general education theory the non-affirmative position is able to bring together an analysis of educational aims, contents, and methods of schooling, teacher professionalism, and leadership. In addition, NAT frames an understanding of how curriculum work at different levels is initiated, implemented, and enacted. In bridging these perspectives, it is argued that critical and hermeneutic NAT provides a theoretically productive approach to present-day local, national, and global education problems. As a foundational frame of reference, NAT allows us to perceive curriculum discourses as different forms of mediating, hermeneutic invitations, and summoning to self-activity and self-formation (Bildung), within and for a democratic polity.

**Keywords:** hermeneutic educational leadership; non-affirmative education; Bildung

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## Introduction

The point of departure of this conceptual article is that a significant driver of globalization and world economy in the past three decades has been an agenda of transnational economism (financialization, economic internalization), supported by technological standardization, deregulation of laws and neoliberal market-oriented politics (Peters, Paraskeva & Besley, 2015). These developments have led to new requirements for theorizing educational leadership and curriculum work. In our present-day globalized economy and working life which has become increasingly knowledge- and development intensive, schooling and higher education are widely defined as innovative vehicles for serving economic ends, rather than seen as havens of critical reflection and personal growth in a broader meaning. Rather than seeing societal practices in a reciprocal, dynamic or non-hierarchical relation to each other, an instrumentalist doctrine of economic profit has been strengthened as the driver and criteria for successful schooling. Today, new regimes “institute new technologies of governance on behalf of hegemonic conception of knowledge-based economy” (Normand, 2016, p. 200). In this process, we have seen the power base of political institutions at different levels become weakened (Hveem, 1999). Paired with a stepwise loss of other guiding societal or historical meta-narratives than global competition and consumerism, these very interests may have contributed, in complex ways, to observable counterreactions. Such reactions are increasingly expanding cultural neo-nationalism, more populist politics, economic protectionism, new forms of self-centered identity formation, religious fundamentalism, mistrust in democratic political participation, and decreasing respect for knowledge institutions and established media. There are no simple causal relations, only complexities. Yet, the signs are worrying—in Europe, in Asia, and in the US.

In dealing with these contemporary challenges in educational policymaking and theorizing, there is one answer that often reoccurs. According to this answer, the solution lies in radically reforming and redirecting present-day education practices, as they are considered inappropriate with respect to existing and future challenges. To continue such practices, the argument goes, would only prolong an unfavorable situation as new generations would continuously be socialized into practices that do not contain the solutions required. Instead, research should contribute to renewed policies and develop new curriculum ideals and practices, as well as new leadership policies that can turn things right for the future. This is precisely the argumentation structure that Rousseau (1762) applied in his famous preface to *Émile* in advocating a new, transformative or reformatory education practice. Here education was regarded as an instrument in the creation of a new, preferred social order.

Indeed, one can easily argue that a solution on these global developments would require a renewed focus on policies promoting critical, constructive, and responsible individuals and citizens, with a sense of reflected personal identity and cultural belonging. Such identities would be capable of recognizing others and be socially responsible, which is central in a multicultural society and for active democratic citizenship. A long tradition

of broad self-formation (*Bildung*) centered education share these ideals and values (Klafki, 1995; Benner, 2015). However, Western education policies have, in fact, for decades approved of, defended and practiced such ideals as leading principles. Education for personal and cultural identity, political and economic citizenship, as well as education for a global humanity and international solidarity has been a strongly guiding principle. Despite education along these ideals for the past 50 years, we have witnessed the expansion of an instrumental education policy, curricular developments oriented towards more performative competencies as well as accountability based leadership and evaluation practices. From 20<sup>th</sup> century history we can find many examples of how formative education ideals have not been able to hinder developments opposite to the intended ones.

Of course, one can ask why we should give up certain ideals only if they have not become fulfilled in intended ways? They might still be worth pursuing. Yet, such historical developments problematizes how educational policymaking and educational theorizing are to be related. In the end, educational theorizing and research is not the same as educational policy making and educational practice. How should we then reflect beyond positions that either subordinates educational practice to politics, or that considers the task of education to form a world beyond what is?

Political problems cannot be solved by educational initiatives alone, yet alone solved by educational theorizing. Educational practice does not safe-guard against future political development. A reason to why non-affirmative theory of education, reflected upon in this article, does not promote a detailed curriculum for the future, as the solution to present-day problems, is that this position intend to maintain a difference between politics and education as two different societal practices. In addition, the argument defended is that beyond descriptions of how things are and prescriptions of how things should be, we need theory that conceptually makes visible the dynamics between politics and education, without sub- or super-ordinating one of them above the other. One way of qualifying such a non-hierarchical, or relational, view between politics and education is to analyze how to connect both curriculum theory and *Didaktik* with educational policy research and leadership studies.

Challenged by the above empirical policies and governance practices in nation states in a globalized world, the research problem in this article is to further elaborate on the research program of critical and hermeneutic Non-Affirmative Theory of education (NAT) (e.g., Uljens, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). In this article it is asked how that approach may provide us with a conceptual framing to analytically and empirically deal with present-day local, national, and global empirical challenges regarding curriculum reform and leadership? The analysis highlights the possible strengths and limits of NAT with respect to policy research and leadership. Before identifying the productive dimensions of the non-affirmative solution in more detail, we begin by taking a closer look at the challenges at hand.

## The globalized neoliberal policy context as a challenge for curriculum theory and educational leadership

From a historical perspective, curriculum theory and Didaktik have developed with the gradual establishment of the modern, autonomous nation-state as its framework, guided by a view that this nation state by means of a political process independently formulates a vision for its future, to be realized through education (Hopmann, 1999). This is no longer as self-evident as before (Beck, 2006; Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The nation-state perspective is challenged by geopolitical re-positionings and changes in the economic production on a global scale (Karseth & Sivesind 2010; Moos 2017; Sivesind & Wahlström, 2017). The political agenda in global, post-industrial, knowledge economies and information societies has changed the role of the nation- or federal state, the ethos of knowledge, education, and research, as well as the governance policies and leadership of the education sector. Today the role of the market and economy has grown into the major point of reference against which many educational initiatives are measured.

The stepwise move away from the social-democratic welfare state model in Europe (old public administration) to a more neoliberal competition-oriented model (new public management) have made it clear that system-level changes may have profound consequences for the activities, identities, and development of professionals. Replacing one bureaucracy with another, that is, the movement from government to governance (Tiihonen, 2004), has turned the attention towards understanding educational leadership as a broader, multilevel project (see Figure 1, Uljens & Nyman, 2013), which is also a position accepted in this article. In much educational leadership research, such a multilevel perspective is surprisingly recent (e.g., Fullan, 2005), while the German-Nordic tradition of Didaktik has long recognized the distributed multilevel activity nature of education (see e.g., Uljens, 1997). The Didaktik tradition covers a nation-state and a classroom perspective (Hopmann, 2015), although educational leadership has been a blind spot in this tradition (Uljens, 2015). Also in other respects, the need for theorizing educational leadership is widely observed (e.g., Burgess & Newton, 2015).

*Figure 1. Curriculum leadership as a distributed multilevel process*



Source: Author

An increasingly instrumentalist view of education is also visible in the expansion of a competency based curriculum policy (Gervais, 2016; Moos & Wubbels, 2018). Although interpreted in multiple ways, competency based education seems to emphasize performativity and qualification as central aims of education. Such a turn in policy more broadly challenges Bildung-centered orientations to human learning and growth, emphasizing reflective identity, personality, character, and citizenship (Klafki, 1995; Hopmann, 2015; Oettingen, 2016). One of the cornerstones of this modern Bildung is the notion of autonomy (Mündigkeit) as the highest objective of education, that is, discerning thought and action regarding issues of both knowledge and values.

These ongoing changes are far from being simply functional or organizational but are also ideological. The shift towards neoliberal education policies promoting competition as a vehicle to improve educational outcomes, as well as corresponding technologies of governance (Petterson, Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2017), do have profound consequences for professional activity, identity, and development in the education sector. For example, in the higher education sector “assessment is a means for controlling professionals and intensifying their workload” (Norman, 2016, p. 202).

This movement and related discourses are truly international, but they take different forms in various countries (Paraskeva and Steinberg, 2016). For example, in Europe various types of deregulation and decentralization as well as reregulation and recentralization of political power within nation states have occurred since the 1980s (Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall, & Serpieri, 2016).

Policies, curriculum work, governance, and leadership form a new complex web where we need to understand better both the relation between politics and education and the nature of leadership interactions at an organizational level. Educational leadership has recently experienced renewed need for theorizing its object (Niesche, 2017). Therefore, one limitation of existing mainstream research in educational leadership has been its focus on the individual leader or leadership activities in schools, mainly based on organizational theory, while leadership research based on educational theory has been lacking. Yet, there are many indications of a redirection in this matter in Nordic educational leadership research (e.g., articles in this volume). Regarding the International Successful School Principals Program (e.g., Day, 2005), Møller (2017) observes that “the design does not allow for critical analysis of the wider power structure. A societal perspective is as important as the organizational one” (p. 381). Another indication of a redefinition of Nordic educational leadership research is visible when Tian & Risku (2018) argue that “Even though enacting curriculum reforms inherently incorporates leadership elements, very few studies have so far connected these two types of research.” Their contribution is to adopt a non-affirmative education theory combined with distributed leadership, to study such curriculum enactment. That said, it should be pointed out that contextual awareness is by no means absent in much educational leadership research (e.g., Fullan, 2005; Gunter et al., 2016; Shields, 2012). Yet, dominant positions in the literature tend to advocate either counterhegemonic views of power defending alternative curricular and educational ideals

for leadership and schools (Shields, 2012) or descriptive-functional approaches aimed at evaluating impact as well as the instrumental betterment of existing practice, emphasizing effective leadership (for an overview see Gunter & Ribbins, 2003).

Today we can see an increasing number of counterproductive consequences emanating from the deregulation of laws, decentralization of administration, a focus on cost-benefit and efficiency, privatization, technological standardization, including an orientation towards a competency based curriculum, and an idea of increased individual choice and reduced focus on egalitarianism to minimize disparities, initiated stepwise since the 1980s, especially after 1989. These counterproductive and unintended consequences have resulted in increasing mistrust as to whether a global neoliberal policy may provide sustainable solutions guiding reform in the public sector including education. Still, transnational corporations are permitted to increase their profits dramatically without necessarily raising the quality of services previously provided by the public sector (Petersen & Hjelmar, 2014). It seems that large portions of citizens in many parts of the world feel that recent for-profit developments regarding welfare, health-care, education, and work have developed in a unfavorable direction.

These counterproductive consequences make it more important to see connections between economic neoliberal globalization, national and transnational governance policies, educational ideals, as well as curriculum and leadership practices within and between levels. These challenges have turned the attention, first, towards understanding curriculum reform and educational leadership thereof as intertwined; and second, curriculum reform as a much broader and complex undertaking than typically perceived.

It is not surprising that many find the situation challenging also for curriculum theory (e.g., Deng 2016; Young 2013; Paraskeva & Steinberg, 2016; Wraga, 2016; Priestley, 2011). The presented critique points in many directions. Wraga (2016) argues that curriculum research “fails to correct misrepresentations of the historic field of curriculum development” (p. 99). It has been noted that contemporary curriculum theorizing developed because a nation-state perspective lacks conceptual instruments for handling the global learning discourse (Young, 2013). The old debate between formal and material theories of Didaktik, for example, why and how generic knowledge should be prioritized over disciplinary subject specific knowledge, or the other way around (Deng, 2016), is one of the perennial issues revitalized by the OECDs policy where general capabilities primarily refers to performative competency. Other researchers note that curriculum research no longer actively engage in complicated conversations about policies and is, in many countries, not involved in societal curriculum reform. Continuing fragmentation of the field is obvious. From a limited European perspective, North-American post-reconceptualist curriculum research increasingly focusing on identity seems to have lost sight of crucial parts of its empirical object, namely the societal discourse on curriculum as policy and policy initiative as well as the governance and leadership of these processes (see e.g., Fang He, Schulz, & Schubert, 2015; Nordin & Sundberg, 2018). From a NAT point of view, most of these initiatives contain valuable observations but are often limited for one reason or

another. A complementary perspective is instead supported, as when Nordin & Sundberg observe that:

Losing sight of the substantive ideas making and remaking human institutions in communicative interaction means a loss of explanatory power and is just as problematic as a neglect of the actual subject content to be learned. (2018, p. 2)

Even if it was pointed out that educational leadership research often is founded in organizational theory or general social philosophy rather than educational theory, we need to critically ask about the limitations of laying educational theory as a foundation for educational leadership. To what extent is it possible to handle these broad and complex developments, the influence of transnational initiatives, in addition to, for instance, education leaders' activities supporting teachers' professional development or school reform, as truly educational phenomena? Can an education theory convincingly frame all these aspects or is there a need to move beyond education theory and rather anchor leadership and curriculum research in policy research, such as discursive institutionalism (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018; Nordin & Sundberg, 2018)? A conceptual clarification in this matter is indeed difficult, given the many ways in which education, curriculum, and leadership are theorized in different traditions. The general point of departure of the present article is that educational leadership, curriculum studies, organizational theory, and policy research are all necessary perspectives in aiming at understanding institutionalized education in democratic nation states. Yet, ethical, political, sociological, psychological, cultural, and subject matter issues are nothing more than perspectives on schooling, not theories of education. This article rather takes its point of departure in a German-Nordic tradition of theorizing education, not in, for example, ethical, psychological, sociological, or political theorizing or in any given epistemological theory. In this, the position is anchored in a long-standing, primarily German-Nordic tradition of general education (e.g., Benner, 2015).

### **The non-affirmative approach to educational leadership as curriculum work**

When providing conceptual answers for understanding educational leadership as curriculum work, we need to define theoretically the questions that are considered legitimate to pose. A first question concerns (a) how we theoretically define the relation between education and other societal forms of practices including politics, culture, and economics: How should we theorize public education and curriculum in relation to politics, culture, and economics? Educational practice is under the influence of all these fields, while simultaneously preparing for participation in all of them. This first question is typical in curriculum research in that it asks how politics regulates education, given that one aim of education in democracies is to prepare for participation in future political life. A second question concerns (b) what kind of theories may help us conceptually understand the na-

ture of teachers' and education leaders' pedagogical interaction with students and colleagues, that is, how we theorize the pedagogical or educational qualities of leadership and teaching.

### **Beyond reproductive socialization and counterhegemonic transformation**

According to both conservative, reproduction-oriented models as well as counterhegemonic, utopian emancipatory pedagogy, what education aims at is often predetermined. Reproduction oriented models often accepts contemporary practices and values as normative, while transformative models aims are using ideal future possible practices and ideals as normative. The task for educational practice is then, according to both, to fulfil these ideals as efficiently as possible either as education as socialization into something already existing, or as education according to some ideals that should be realized or come true in the future. Therefore, the previous models, taken seriously, run the risk of turning education, curriculum work, and teaching into a technological profession where results relate to values external to the profession and practice. Neither of these would be able to solve the problem described initially, that is, a reproduction-oriented approach does not typically question ongoing developments but rather supports them. In turn, the alternative, or counterhegemonic, critical reasoning may end up replacing an existing ideology with another one, yet remaining in an instrumentalist relation to educational practice and students.

While both reproduction or socialization and transformation oriented curriculum models run an obvious risk of ending up with instrumentalist education, non-affirmative theory argues against both, seeing education as a vehicle for reproduction or for making predetermined ideas about the future come true. NAT positions itself, not between but beyond these models, as they, according to non-affirmative theory, tend to instrumentalize educational practice in the service of other interests.

In principle, a political democracy will have difficulties viewing education either as socialization into something existing or as an idealist transformation of society with the help of education. We, therefore, face the problem of which theoretical tools are required to understand education in a non-teleological perspective, that is, to educate for a world where the future is not knowable.

In this context, it is very important to remind ourselves that NAT does not advocate a value neutral position. On the contrary, NAT is a theory in and for a political democracy. In a theory for democratic education, it would be a mistake to equate pedagogical practice with politics as practice, as it is a mistake to equate educational theory with political ideology or political utopia. Education and politics are indeed related, yet neither can be solely deduced from the other without violating the idea and nature of each other. In non-democratic polities, education is by definition strictly subordinate to politics. In democratic education, and in education for democracy, the task of education is to prepare for

political participation. Such education *is* normative, that is, valuebound, in that it recognizes and respects political freedom of thought and the rights to political convictions, by not deciding in advance how citizens should think. I agree with Green when he observes that

curriculum is best understood, first and foremost, as inescapably, always-already political—that there is, in effect, nothing outside *curriculum-as-political-text*. That means that, inter alia, knowledge questions are always, inescapably bound up with questions of power. (2017, p. 1)

Given that “knowledge questions are always, inescapably bound up with questions of power” the question is how educational leadership and pedagogical practice is theorized and thought to be dealing with these power dimensions? As this article shares the view that the object of curriculum research is a political text and that teaching and educational leadership are normative practices, the remaining question is how our *theories* should position themselves in this respect. Are they, or should they be, political in the same way as a curriculum is a policy document? Is pedagogical practice by definition as political as the curriculum as text? Let us have a look at this in the next section.

### **A non-hierarchical view of the relation between education and politics**

In NAT, education and politics, as two forms of societal practices, relate to each other in a non-hierarchical way. In such a view, politics is viewed to direct and regulate education but in a way that the educated subjects will become able to step in and reformulate a future political agenda of society. According to non-affirmative theory, politics, therefore, accept to operate by a permanent open question: To what extent and how strong should policies steer education practice? If politics in advance strictly try to decide how a future generation should think and act, then, paradoxically, this would endanger the future of a democratic state. That is, democratic states need to educate its citizens for democracy.

Let us look at the non-hierarchical relation between politics and education from a pedagogical perspective. According to non-affirmative theory, a hierarchical reasoning subordinating education to politics would reduce pedagogical reflection and practice to an efficiency problem: How efficiently can given educational aims be reached by educational efforts? Superordinating education over politics would again mean that the field of education alone would define towards what kind of future the world should be moved. NAT would argue in favor of a third position. It reminds us that education and politics do not have to be super- or subordinated to each other. Consequently, NAT identifies curricular ideals in a democracy as resulting from a public dialogue involving politics, cultural reflection and professionals’ opinions. NAT would remind us that the teacher must recognize existing interests, policies, ideologies, utopias, and cultural practices, but would not be asked to affirm them. Not to affirm various predefined interests means to not pass them on to the next generation without making these interests objects of critical reflection in pedagogical practice with students. According to NAT, citizenship education for de-

mocracy can therefore not be about the socialization of youth into a given form of democracy, but must include critical reflection of historical, existing, and possible future versions of democracy.

### **Non-affirmative theory as critical theory**

Claiming that NAT is an analytic vehicle does not mean that it is not considered value neutral. There is a moral imperative inherent in this theory, saying, for example, that the teacher is not expected to affirm existing societal practices or future political or educational ideals. Such a behavior would mean the reduction of education to an art aiming at fulfilling given, specified aims. Education would then be about technical instrumentalism. Yet, leaders and teachers in public school systems are, by law, expected to follow the spirit of a curriculum and must recognize such interests. NAT therefore argues that teachers must recognize curricular aims and contents, but that they are not allowed to affirm these aims and contents. To affirm them would mean not to problematize these aims and contents with students, thereby reducing education to transmitting given values and contents. This is how NAT explains the creation of what is here called *pedagogical spaces for the student or pupil*. These pedagogical spaces feature critical reflection of what is, what is not, and what might be. They represent an invitation to discern thought and experimental practice, that is, the critical contemplation of contents advocated by the curriculum as policy. A non-affirmative approach reminds us of Klafki's *categorical Bildung*- or erudition centered position, where the idea is to work around the selected contents (Bildungsinhalt) so that its potential educative qualities (Bildungsgehalt) are opened up (Jank & Meyer, 1997). In this way *educative teaching* unites socialization and personalization.

In NAT, following a Hegel-inspired view of recognition, educational practice is mediational, and thereby hermeneutic in character while being aware of actors' experiences. Finally, as has been shown in earlier writings, a number of root concepts provided by the tradition of modern education theory are fruitful for trying to conceptualize nation-state education also in a globopolitan perspective (Uljens, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017).

### **NAT and the objects of educational leadership as curriculum work**

One major strand of curriculum research focus complex political, economic, cultural, organizational, and professional discourses, studying ideas implemented, how ideas travel across contexts or how they are negotiated between levels. Another strand of research views the object of curriculum research as focusing on individuals' growth, or the interactional teaching-studying-learning process.

In this article, research on *educational leadership as curriculum work* (Uljens, 2015), is defined as the study of a) the contents of curricular policies expressing the aims, contents, and methods of education, including evaluation, at different levels; b) various kinds of policy work as well as collaborative and distributed leadership and teaching practices

regarding different stages and their internal relations, for example, initiation, implementation, enactment, development, and evaluation of curriculum; c) horizontal curriculum policy-borrowing between and within nation-states; d) vertical, situational, sociocultural, and organizational activities between and within different levels of policy work, educational leadership, and teaching, from the transnational level to the classroom level; e) historical, philosophical, theoretical, and methodological reflection and analysis regarding the above dimensions. The above list identifies central, if not all, dimensions of what educational leadership is about, regarding curricula (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017).

### **Non-affirmative education theory and cross-disciplinary curriculum research**

Curriculum research is cross-disciplinary and may therefore productively be studied with the help of educational policy analysis, governance research, historical research, educational leadership studies, organizational theory, theory of teaching and learning, as well as educational philosophy and ethics, including the theory of *Bildung* (e.g., Pinar, 2011).

However, if research on curriculum is only understood as an empirical object that can be theorized by any discipline and any approach, the educational character of the object runs the risk of getting lost. Therefore, in this article, it is assumed that curriculum research ultimately must be based on a theory of education in order to be educationally relevant. In this context, the German-Nordic tradition of general education (*Allgemeine Pädagogik*) is considered a disciplinary field, which theoretically is equipped to embrace the wide scope of curriculum research without losing a pedagogical point of departure. This does not mean that a specific policy or leadership perspective could or should not be accepted as legitimate. Rather, the idea is here that such a specific focus or research perspective would be better off by being ultimately founded on an education theory.

### **Non-affirmative theory focusing on curriculum reform activity and the contents of curriculum**

It may be helpful to point out the difference between studying curriculum reform activity and the contents of curriculum. Curriculum reform activity features how curriculum is i) initiated, ii) enacted, and iii) reflected, at different levels (Hopmann, 1999). This includes evaluation. It makes sense to try to identify phases of this process. It also makes sense to describe the different discourses involved, within and between different levels and parties (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018) in a historical and comparative perspective. In curriculum reform activity, initiating curriculum work is naturally different from implementing and enacting it. Yet, both initiation, implementation and enactment of the curriculum include elements of both political and pedagogical processes.

However, theorizing curriculum is not only about reflecting on (a) discourses around curriculum reform activity featuring, for example, initiation or enactment, it is also about reflecting on (b) the contents of the curriculum. That is, studying how a given curriculum

defines the regulative educational ideas and aims, selection and selected contents at different levels, values, methods of teaching and learning, collaboration, leadership and evaluation expressed and practiced. A curriculum also strongly reflects dominant ideas of cultures and cultural policy.

Given these points of departure, it is argued that for grasping (a) the initiation phase of curriculum as policy, it may be wise to build upon insights from policy research. Large portions of the initial steps of large-scale national curriculum reforms typically embrace a political debate. In political processes, learning certainly occurs, yet political influence is in essence not the same as pedagogical influence.

### **Non-affirmative theory and curriculum policy initiation**

However, moving from an interest in the initiation to understanding (b) the implementation and enactment of curriculum the situation is different. It is true that implementation and enactment activity at the lower levels of the school system also partly is political. But, the implementation and enactment process is also led by educational activities and led *as* educational activities. For example, national authorities typically invite teachers and principals to reflect on the meaning of a new curricular initiative. Implementation-enactment of curricula is therefore also a pedagogical intervention. Here educational influence or pedagogical intervention does not have to mean implementation of ready-made ideas but invitation to dialogue. In doing so, educational leadership as curriculum work recognizes the relative autonomy of the professional actor. The effects of a curriculum activity are, obviously, also in the hands of the receivers enacting these intentions. The curriculum-making discourse as invitation to self-activity and self-formation creates spaces within and between institutional levels. Finally, also for curriculum research we need educational theory to frame an analysis of the contents of the curriculum, that is, educational aims, subject matter (contents) and methods of teaching. Curriculum theory (Didaktik) is naturally also needed for understanding curriculum enactment.

In order to handle the (a) initiation phase and parts of the (b) implementation-enactment phase, discourse institutionalism as developed by Vivien Schmidt (2008) is fruitful as has been demonstrated by Nordin and Sundberg (2018). Regarding the pedagogical questions involved, that is, as a part of the curriculum reform activity and as the contents of the curriculum we naturally need educational theory to frame this research. NAT is considered fit for these purposes as it includes conceptual tools for understanding both a) curriculum reform activity as a multilevel process including educational moments, and b) the contents of the curriculum, also defining the relation between, for example, politics and pedagogy as well as the teaching-studying learning process. The idea is in short to argue for that the very same theoretical constructs may be applied for analyzing (a) the teaching-studying-learning process related to the aims and teaching contents of the curriculum and (b) educational leadership in curriculum reform activity that is about the implementation-enactment of the curriculum.

### **Non-affirmative education in a globopolitan perspective**

Today we are in need of a renewed and extended discussion on cosmopolitanism and the modern, nation-state centered heritage in curriculum and education (e.g., Brincat 2009; Moland 2011; Moos & Wubbels, 2018). Kemp (2010) points at three core questions for today's cosmopolitanism: (a) how does economic globalisation relate to democratic control of the economy and technology, (b) how should we deal with conflicts between national or culturally related interests and challenges connected to sustainable development and, finally, (c) how should we deal with global responsibility? These questions are relevant in and for education and curriculum making, but they are not limited to education alone. In curriculum theory and educational leadership, globalization, cosmopolitanism, or globopolitanism, mainly falls into two different parts: cosmopolitanism as an educational ideal and cosmopolitanism as empirical transnational policy activities, reflecting dynamics between states and between states and transnational aggregations of various kinds (Uljen & Ylimaki, 2017). For NAT it is vital to point out that the previously made distinction between, on the one hand, a policy perspective focusing on national and transnational reform processes and, on the other hand, an educational perspective focusing on aims, contents and methods, remains valid when turning the attention from a nation-state level to a transnational level.

*Cosmopolitanism as an educational ideal* centers around aims, contents and methods of education, that is, curricular questions. Both Kant and Herbart proposed cosmopolitanism as an ideal. “Das Weltbeste” (Kant 1915), meaning the best for the world, rather than private, national interests, was to be the aim of education (Perander 1883), that is, also in the modern tradition we are familiar with the distinction between education for humanity and education for citizenship. In such reflections, we are engaged with understanding the contents of the curriculum, that is, the aims, subject matter and methods of education as expressed in empirical policy documents and analyzed on the basis of some theory of education.

*Cosmopolitanism as transnationalism* points towards how transnational organizations like OECD influence educational nation-state practices through the initiation and organization of international evaluations. In addition, cosmopolitanism as transnationalism include how nation states drive national policy reforms indirectly via transnational institutions. In order to understand and analyze the educational meaning or *contents* of these global or transnational policies it is argued that educational theory is beneficial. However, researching the *processes* around these contents, we need also other approaches, for example, policy theories. So, as previously demonstrated, understanding classroom leadership, school leadership and partly curriculum leadership at a nation-state level requires educational theory. Yet, as transnational policy processes are seldom “educational” in nature they cannot completely be conceptualized by education theory. This does not prevent transnational institutions like the EU or OECD to shape member states through legislation, recommendations or the like. However, as noted, for the most part, this kind of

influencing activity does not meet strict criteria of educational influencing, rather we are here talking about political influence.

### **Non-affirmative theory and transnational policy**

Educational leadership and curriculum research today acknowledge a multilevel perspective, which reflects a broader conceptualization of these fields. From a critical sociology perspective on educational leadership, Gunter et al. (2016) have demonstrated that system-level and transnational modifications indeed do influence individual states', schools', and professionals' work. Similarly, Nordin and Sundberg (2014) argue that an increasing share of state policy formation is not bound to national boundaries but takes place in complex, dense and multidirectional transnational exchange.

From a European perspective, the development of the European Union (EU) quite obviously has contributed to the convergence of nation states toward a European knowledge discourse, identified as Europeanization. As the European Union lacks coercive power over member states, Normand and Derouet (2017) note that soft governance in the form of expert knowledge and standardization has turned out as a central governing strategy. Nation-state policy systems featuring stronger regional autonomy demonstrate similar patterns of governing at a distance within the nation state. This reflects a soft governance strategy identified as competition oriented cooperation (Grek 2008; Normand 2016) utilizing international evaluation data.

As seen, there are many ways to approach a multilevel, multicentered and multiprofessional educational governance system. As has been argued elsewhere (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017), NAT considers discursive institutionalism (DI), as developed by Schmidt (2008), as a fruitful complement to understanding how educational policies, ideas, and values (curriculum) relate to administrative processes at different levels beyond schools and municipalities, given the answers provided by a non-hierarchical view on the relation between politics and education as well as the non-affirmative approach to educational interaction (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017, p. 104f; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018; Nordin & Sundberg, 2018). Following NAT,

discursive institutionalism aims at understanding how cognitive ideas (problems identification) and normative ideas (values that legitimize problems) are developed and communicated across societal, philosophical, policy, and program levels. ... The term discourse refers not only to structure (what is said, or where or how) but also to agency (who said what to whom). Specifically, Schmidt argues that ideas operate as coordinative and communicative discourses. Coordinative discourses refer to policy construction among policy actors while communicative discourse refers to policy legitimization between policy actors and the general public. (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017, p. 105f)

With its grounding in public administration, however, Schmidt's DI does not have an underlying educational language or theory of education. DI is therefore best apt for analyzing curriculum reform processes as an example of policy implementation, while it is not a strong position by itself to analyze how aims, contents, and methods are interrelated for educational purposes. The ideas and methodology of DI may equally well be applied

for any policy analysis having an interest in substantive ideas and processes around these, thus demonstrating that this position in itself does not contain an educational theory.

## Conclusion

In their analysis of educational policies, Moos & Wubbels (2018) identify and discuss in a clarifying way two contemporary but dissimilar educational discourses; a democratic Bildung discourse and an outcomes discourse. To theoretically make sense of the empirical descriptions by Moos & Wubbels (2018) this article argued that we need an approach sensitive to educational leadership as curriculum work as a multi-dimensional phenomenon. We simultaneously need to acknowledge dimensions identified by either curriculum research, by policy research, or by leadership research:

- a) The contents of those curricular policies expressing the aims, contents, and methods of education, including evaluation, at different levels.
- b) The various kinds of policy work as well as collaborative and distributed leadership and teaching practices regarding different stages and their internal relations, that is, initiation, implementation, enactment, development, and evaluation of curriculum.
- c) The horizontal curriculum policy-borrowing between and within nations states.
- d) The vertical, situational, sociocultural and organizational activities between and within different levels of policy work, educational leadership and teaching, from the transnational level to the classroom level.
- e) The historical, philosophical, theoretical, and methodological reflection and analysis regarding the above dimensions.

Taking the theoretical point of departure in non-affirmative general education theory, this article intended at pointing out distinctions that help us to better identify nation-state based curriculum work and leadership in a transnational light.

According to this analysis, understanding educational leadership as curriculum reform activity is not the same as understanding the contents of a curriculum (aims, contents, methods, etc.) or its interpretational implementation and enactment at different levels. It was suggested how to approach these different aspects of curriculum research. The first proposal was to define the relation between education and other societal practices (politics, economy, culture, etc.) as non-hierarchical, that is, as reciprocally influencing each other. Ontologically such a position constitutes discursive spaces forming a fundamental point of departure both for an essential understanding of education in and for a democratic society and for understanding more generally the dynamics of an ateleological societal order.

In principle, the same point of departure applies also for considering interstate relations as well as relations between transnational aggregations and nation states. This non-hierarchical point of departure is what lies at the bottom of contemporary social and societal theory in a modern tradition. A second proposal in understanding not only educational

leadership but also implementation and enactment as curriculum reform, was to identify the difference between political dimensions of curriculum work and educational or pedagogical dimensions of this work. Third, if curriculum research, comparative or otherwise, intends to analyze the contents of a curriculum from a pedagogical perspective, then obviously such an initiative is to be grounded in a theory of education, not in political sciences, or in organization theory typically dominating educational leadership research.

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