CRITICAL COMPARATIVE CURRICULUM RESEARCH BEYOND GLOBALIZED NEOLIBERAL POLICY

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Abstract

Transnational issues have challenged traditional ideas of citizenship and identity formation in democratic societies for the past 30 years. This includes cultural nationalism, populism, economic protectionism, social media identity construction, performative behavior, religious fundamentalism, mistrust in democratic political participation, and a decrease in respect for knowledge institutions and established media. The rise of new social media and the neoliberal market-state ideology have contributed to these trends. Non-Affirmative Education Theory (NAT) can address these challenges by providing a framework for analyzing educational aims, contents, methods, and governance, and can serve as a starting point for comparative curriculum research.

Keywords: curriculum leadership, educational leadership, non-affirmative education, comparative curriculum research.

INVESTIGACIÓN CURRICULAR COMPARATIVA CRÍTICA MÁS ALLÁ DE LA POLÍTICA NEOLIBERAL GLOBALIZADA

Resumen

Problemas transnacionales, como el nacionalismo cultural, el populismo, el proteccionismo económico, la construcción de la identidad en las redes sociales, el comportamiento performativo, el fundamentalismo religioso, la desconfianza en la participación política democrática y una disminución del respeto por las instituciones generadoras de conocimiento los medios de comunicación tradicionales, han puesto en tela de juicio las ideas tradicionales de ciudadanía y de formación de la identidad en las sociedades democráticas en los últimos 30 años. El auge de los nuevos medios de comunicación social y la ideología neoliberal dominante en los estados capitalistas han contribuido a estas tendencias. La Teoría de la Educación No Afirmativa (NAT) permite abordar estos retos ofreciendo un marco reflexivo desde el que analizar los objetivos, los contenidos, los métodos y la gobernanza de la educación, y puede servir como punto de partida para la investigación curricular comparada.

Palabras clave: liderazgo curricular, liderazgo educativo, educación no afirmativa, investigación curricular comparada.

1. INTRODUCTION

The point of departure of this conceptual article is that contemporary tendencies in curriculum leadership forms an inherent part of a more general shift in governing and governance of societal development. In many different ways, this shift in governance is visible in educational issues. When accepting educational leadership as an embedded phenomenon it requires reflecting educational leadership relationally and contextually. Curriculum leadership then connect not only to *what* is lead, and *how* this leadership is organized and practiced, but also to more general ideas about the societal tasks of education. Accepting, that curriculum leadership is leadership of pedagogical work, and accepting, that curriculum leadership itself operates through pedagogical measures, organization theory, sociology, politics or psychology are insufficient as theoretical bases. Given that curriculum work, educational assessment, educational policy, resource allocation, teaching practices and leadership form a complex web, it does not either suffice to theorize curriculum leadership as an isolated phenomenon at some specific level of the education system. Rather, we need to develop a comprehensive, historical, contextual, and processual, view of educational leadership (Uljens & Nyman, 2013; Uljens, 2015; Uljens, Wolff & Frontini, 2016; Elo & Uljens, 2022). This chapter argues, curriculum leadership is understood better if relating it to: a) the societal task of education – the *why* of educational leadership, b) the pedagogical nature of leadership interactions at different organizational levels – the *how* of educational leadership, and c) the object led or school work – the *what* of educational leadership.

In fact, there seems to be an increasing agreement that educational leadership and curriculum leadership is in need for further theorizing its object (Niesche, 2017; Burgess & Newton, 2015). In Nordic educational leadership research, there are many indications of a redirection in this matter (*e.g.*, articles in this volume). In critiquing the International Successful School Principals Program (ISSPP) (*e.g.*, Day, 2005), Møller (2017) observe, "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: "Even though enacting curriculum reforms inherently incorporates leadership elements, very few studies have so far connected these two types of research." Tian & Risku (2018) favor adopting a non-affirmative education theory combined with distributed leadership, to study such curriculum enactment. That said, 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 positions of power, defending alternative curricular and educational ideals for leadership and schools (Shields, 2012), or they advocate descriptive-functionalist approaches aimed at evaluating impact as well as the instrumental improvement of existing practice, emphasizing effective leadership (for an overview see Gunter & Ribbins, 2003; Elo & Uljens, 2022).

Given the above developments, a major argument of this article is to ground curriculum leadership research in education theory. The simple reason for

such a move is that education theory is arguably capable of dealing with the above expectations regarding the why, how and what of educational leadership. First, a theory of education offers us a language for exploring societal aims of education. These aims communicate how education relates to other forms of societal practice, like politics, economy and culture. Second, theory of education offer us a language for clarifying how curriculum leadership pedagogically influences others' learning, and thereby professional development. Curriculum leadership significantly operates through pedagogical influencing. Third, theory of education offer us the tools for understanding teaching, studying and learning which are practices that education leaders lead, the assumption being that understanding teaching is a central dimension of education leaders professional competence (Uljens, 2021).

To avoid misunderstandings, I want to emphasize that although curriculum leadership obviously feature ethical, sociological, psychological, organizational, political, and economic dimensions, this article does not want to reduce educational leadership to any of these fields alone. Rather, the aims, practices and object of curriculum leadership, are as dimensions of a *pedagogical* phenomenon that is in need of education theory to be understood. After first viewing curriculum leadership as a pedagogical phenomenon, we may benefit from utilizing additional perspectives, as those mentioned above.

However, different education theories deal with the above questions differently, and sometimes only in very limited fashions. In exploring how education theory frames the why, how and what of curriculum leadership, this chapter is grounded in the research program of critical Bildung theoretical Non-Affirmative Theory of education (NAT) (*e.g.* Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017; Uljens & Smeds-Nylund, 2021; Elo & Uljens, 2022; Uljens; 2023). The argument is that a non-affirmative interpretation of school didactics offer us a platform for comparative multi-level curriculum leadership research (Uljens, in press). The original approach to school didactics (Uljens, 1997) resulted from bridging Ulf P. Lundgrens's (1989) frame factor theory and Ference Marton's phenomenography (1981). School didactics was later developed with the help of Dietrich Benner's non-affirmative theory of general education (Uljens, 1998; Uljens, 2023). The idea with non-affirmative school didactics is to bridge curriculum leadership at different levels, from the classroom level to the nation-state level.

From here, I continue, in more detail, by pointing out how I perceive contemporary societal changes. I then return to the proposal offered by non-affirmative education theory.

2. CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES REQUIRING US TO BRIDGE CURRICULUM THEORY AND EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

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). In our

present-day globalized economy and working life, which has become increasingly knowledge- and development-intensive, schooling and 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. An instrumentalist doctrine of economic profit has 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 counter reactions. 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.

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 professionals. Neoliberal education policies promoting competition as a vehicle to improve educational outcomes, as well as corresponding technologies of governance (Petterson, Popkewitz & Lindblad, 2017), influence professional activity and 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). Generally taken, more consumer centered education policy, make schools accountable for students' success and require schools increasingly to document the steps taken in various matters. This has increased principals' and teachers' work-load and is today one of the most heated topics regarding the teachers profession in Finland. In turn, the performance and achievement centered curriculum policies increases stress among pupils and students in ways not seen before.

Instrumentalist views of education are visible in how education is governed. It is also visible in the expansion of a competency-based curriculum policy (Gervais, 2016; Moos & Wubbels, 2018). Despite being interpreted in multiple ways, competency based education often emphasize performativity and qualification in terms of generic competencies as central aims of education. Such a turn in policy challenges Bildung-centered orientations to human learning and growth that emphasize reflective identity, multidimensional personality development, moral reasoning and political citizenship (Klafki, 1995; Hopmann, 2015; Oettingen, 2016). One of the cornerstones of this modern idea of 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. In other words, neoliberal policy challenges a longstanding European idea of Bildung centered education.

How has educational leadership research evolved the past three decades? A first observation is that replacing one bureaucracy with another, that is, the movement from government to governance (Tiihonen, 2004), has turned the attention towards understanding curriculum leadership as a broader, multilevel project (Uljens & Nyman, 2013). It is true that curriculum theory, and especially the German-Nordic tradition of Didaktik, has long recognized the distributed multilevel activity nature of education (see *e.g.*, Uljens, 1997). However, for some reason mainstream curriculum research has not included a thorough analysis of educational leadership, management and governance, at different levels, in different political systems. In addition, such policy research operates very much within a tradition of *policy* analysis, which does not typically draw on theory of education. Again, in educational leadership research, a multilevel perspective is surprisingly recent (*e.g.*, Fullan, 2005). And, again, educational leadership research does not related to curriculum theory or Didaktik, and it is not based on educational theory but often on organizational leadership theory. This article argues for the need to bring these fields together and base them on education theory. The argument is that education theory has the capacity capture the field as a whole.

As other fields of research, educational and curriculum leadership research demonstrate clear cross-national and –continental similarities. However, also obvious differences exist (Hopmann, 2015). For example, educational leadership research very much emanated from the Anglophone world in the 1950's. It found its way to European countries in the 1980s and -90s, and has recently reached many Asian countries. As the global neo-liberal education policy has clearly boosted educational leadership research the past two decades, it is especially important that educational leadership is not studied only by instrumentally and efficiency oriented organization researchers, lacking a language of education. Education research must take its responsibility in this matter.

The picture is different when compared with curriculum theory and Didaktik. Despite decades of comparative dialogue, the Anglophone curriculum research and German-Nordic tradition of Didaktik still live very separate lives. The narrow English Channel appears as an Ocean dividing these two traditions, while the Oceans of the world connect Anglophone curriculum research. 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 (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017; Karseth & Sivesind 2010; Moos 2017; Sivesind & Wahlström, 2017).

To conclude, it has become 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 refer 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).

3. 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 nature 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.

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 aim 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 equalize pedagogical practice with politics as practice, as it is a mistake to equalize 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, i.e., value bound, 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.

Given that "knowledge questions are always, inescapably bound up with questions of power" (Green, 1988), 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.

II. 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 democracy 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.

III. Non-affirmative theory as critical theory

Claiming that NAT is an analytic vehicle does not mean that it is 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 should be hesitant in affirming 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 *pedagogical spaces for the students or pupils*. These pedagogical spaces feature critical reflection of what is, what is not, and what might be. They represent an invitation to discerning thought and experimental practice, i.e., 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 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).

IV. NAT and the objects of educational leadership as curriculum work

One major strand of comparative curriculum research focus complex political, economic, cultural, organizational, and professional discourses, studying how ideas are implemented, how ideas travel across contexts or how ideas 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), or curriculum leadership, 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, and 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).

V. Non-affirmative education theory and cross-disciplinary curriculum research

Curriculum research is typically cross-disciplinary. It may therefore 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, we assume 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.

VI. 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.

VII. Non-affirmative theory and curriculum policy initiation

However, moving from studying initiation to understanding (b) the implementation/enactment of curriculum the situation is different. It is true that implementation/enactment activity at the lower levels of the school system also partly is political. But, the implementation and enactment process is also led *by* pedagogical activities and led *as* pedagogical 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.

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 Sundstedt (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.

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 globalization 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 (Uljens & 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 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. 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.

IX. 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 multi-professional 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 (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.

4. 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 curriculum research, by policy research, and 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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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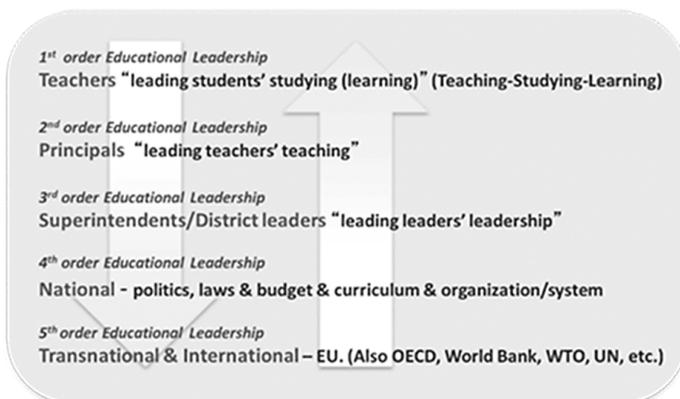
Figure 1. Curriculum leadership as a distributed multilevel process.