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## State-based curriculum-making, Part I

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### ABSTRACT

This paper frames the problem underlying the cross-cultural Organizing Curriculum Change (OCC) study of state-based curriculum-making. The paper discusses the increased use by states over the past two decades of the century-old instrument of the state-based curriculum and the tool of the curriculum commission. The paper contrasts the slender English-language writing on these institutions with the extensive German literature, with particular emphasis on the post-1970s German analysis and the revisionist analysis of the 1980s.

### KEYWORDS

Curriculum-making; national curricula; organizational theory; Germany; legitimation

Syllabus documents stand between public curriculum debate and political party platforms and the practice of curriculum delivery in schools, and elsewhere. Syllabus documents are a pivot point that mediates practice and political platforms with public dialogue. Connelly and Connelly (2008)

As was noted in the previous paper in *JCS* (Westbury et al., 2016), state-based curriculum-making has been the mechanism for governing and steering curricula and teaching in many school systems since their foundation. But, over the past two decades, state curriculum-making has been adopted (or re-adopted) as a new activity by school systems that had never used (or long ago abandoned) formal state-based curricula. And what had been, at other times, an activity only undertaken every decade or so has become an ongoing activity of many ministries (see Rosenmund, 2006; and International Bureau of Education, 2001). In addition, state curriculum-making yielding 'national' curricula or standards is being undertaken by central governments in federal states—as in, for example, Australia, Canada, the US, Switzerland and Germany—that do not have formal, constitutional authority over schooling in their nations. Such state curriculum-making can, of course, be very dramatic in its impact, particularly when it is undertaken in the light of (or because of) major shifts in the ideologies and structures of schooling—as seen, for example, in the UK 'national curriculum' of the 1980s or the US 'standards movement' of the 1990s with their links to mandatory system-wide assessment. *But state curriculum-making is also significant as a routine educational and administrative activity of many ministries and boards of education as they support and ratify ongoing revisions and changes in subject areas and courses of study.* It lies at the heart of the leadership of their schools by ministries, departments and/or boards of education (see Westbury et al., 2015; see also Gundem, 2011; Mølsted & Hansén, 2013).<sup>1</sup> The state's

curriculum-making, and the documents that are its outcome, are at the centre of a web of activity around the inner work of schools, involving textbook publishers, school owners and schools, teacher education faculties in universities and colleges, professional associations, teachers, etc. as well as public interest groups and political lobbies and parties.

*What does this activity accomplish? How can and should we think about formal curriculum-making as a burgeoning activity of the educational agencies of nations, states, cantons, etc.? How might such work be linked to the 'improvement' of the idea and practices of schooling?* As we begin to offer the answers to such questions that have emerged from the OCC project, we will be focusing on the work of a set of *curriculum commissions* or *committees*, the formal structures that are widely used to undertake the periodic work of state curriculum-making.<sup>2</sup> Such commissions are typically formal bodies, appointed and directly funded by ministries or boards of education and reflecting in their membership and working structures 'public', government/administrative and political interests, *and* the relevant communities within and around schools. Such commissions operate, of course, within the working practices of their jurisdictions: their work may be preceded by hearings of parliamentary committees, the framing offered by 'expert' committees; or the development of comprehensive system-wide platforms for 'reform'. They may have their professional staffs drawn from more or less permanent curriculum units within their ministries of education, or their staff may be seconded from other agencies. But, like the analogous mechanisms that are widely adopted for public inquiries,<sup>3</sup> the typical curriculum commission is a *temporary* structure undertaking a focused developmental task. It is typically seen as working outside the routine structures of public or educational administrations and is presented as representing broader 'national' or 'educational' rather than narrowly political, government or 'ministry' interests.

However, as Connelly and Connelly (2010, 2013) highlight, the starting points of many curriculum commissions reflect educational, sociocultural and/or political decisions or movements. So we have such issues as the integration of upper-secondary school types with a university system, new forms of teaching in the elementary school (i.e. pro or con 'play-way'), a generalized need for greater 'literacy', the human resource development necessary for a 'high-tech economy' and/or 'global competitiveness', or the platforms of governing political parties around, e.g. teaching the 'nation'. In other words, the state's curriculum-making is embedded within the structures and platforms of governments, politics, party and interest groups—as well as the state's structures for the management of school systems and of the interests around 'education'. This raises the first significant questions around curriculum commissions: What kind of 'work' are they engaged in? As Connelly and Connelly (2010) write, drawing on their experience of curriculum-making in the Canadian province of Ontario:<sup>4</sup>

The political promise to revise, or create curriculum policy may be an important factor in the election of a particular government. When [a government assumes office] the Education Department or Ministry oversees the follow-up curriculum policy development process. [Curriculum] policy revised or created in this way is political in character and functions to justify voter trust in the political party. From this perspective, curriculum policy is not only political in the sense of being a practical resolution to public debate; it is political in the party sense. *This is neither good nor bad*. It simply means that curriculum policy is a two-sided entity that functions both to guide practical curriculum activity and to temporarily resolve political debate. *Curriculum policy is best thought of as a fulcrum balancing the practical guideline function with the political resolution-of-issues function* (p. 225; emphases added).

But what schools teach, and how they teach, also necessarily engages the professional and organizational traditions of schools and school types, subjects, teachers and their

communities of practice *as well as* the public, and thus public interest groups.<sup>5</sup> In other words, curriculum policy-making for a school *system* must reconcile what might be thought of as the 'public interest' and professional interests in 'best' practice. At the same time, it must recognize and acknowledge the forms of practice and real-world capabilities of the body of teachers who work in the system of schools, and especially in the schools on its periphery (see, e.g. Hart, 2001, 2002). Curriculum 'divisions' or 'branches' within ministries have long grappled with this work of reconciliation of the demands of the 'political' and 'best practice', and of the realities that that govern and steer ordinary school practice.

However, as was noted in the first paper in this series (see Westbury et al., 2016), state-based curriculum work has received little sustained research attention within the Anglo-American traditions of educational research—where (with clear exceptions, e.g. Canada) state-based curriculum-making was not the norm until the last years of the 20th century. It has received more sustained attention within the European traditions of curriculum research where national and state/cantonal curricula have long been the norm. Thus, in contrast to many Anglo-American 'definitions' of 'curriculum' as necessarily embracing such ideas as the students' 'experience' of school,<sup>6</sup> the European tradition has long seen the 'curriculum', the *Lehrplan* (German), *Kursplan* (Swedish) or *programme* (French) as a tool of the state, as an authoritative *document* always potentially subject to multi-layered contest among interest groups, e.g. churches, trade unions, etc.<sup>7</sup> Curriculum theory and curriculum research become inquiries into the contexts and texts of state-based curricula and curriculum-making.

### German research on state-based curriculum-making

In the mid-1960s and the 1970s in the then-Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the structures and mechanisms of state curriculum-making became objects of intense public and professional discussion. The issue, debated as the 'deutsche Bildungskatastrophe', centred on the 'reform' of the FRG's differentiated school systems. However, the questions also found a focus in the realities of youth unemployment, the then-contemporary ideologies of social planning, and the first stirrings of what was to become the educational redefinition of the demands of labour markets and economic development.<sup>8</sup>

This movement received its 'curriculum turn' in the FRG after the publication of Saul Robinsohn's (1967) (see Robinsohn (1969)) influential *Bildungsreform als Revision des Curriculum* (Education reform as revision of the curriculum). Robinsohn advocated the development and use of empirical-analytical models of curriculum-making incorporating a political as well as a professional perspective. His initial advocacy was followed by a movement towards a modernizing 'curriculum studies'.<sup>9</sup> Classical US 'theories' of educational planning and curriculum-making (e.g. Charters, 1923; Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1949) were introduced and promoted to 'replace' the then-traditional *Didaktik*.<sup>10</sup>

One wing of this educational planning (*Bildungsplanung*) movement focused on the curriculum-making of the FRG's states, *Länder*. The issue was the 'conservatism' and 'irrationality' of the traditional structures and methods—seen from the point of view of the 'progressive' and modernizing ideologies of that decade. For the modernizers, curriculum-making needed to be in the hands of more 'dynamic' forward-looking groups than the committees of backward-looking, traditionalist teachers who were seen as dominating the process.

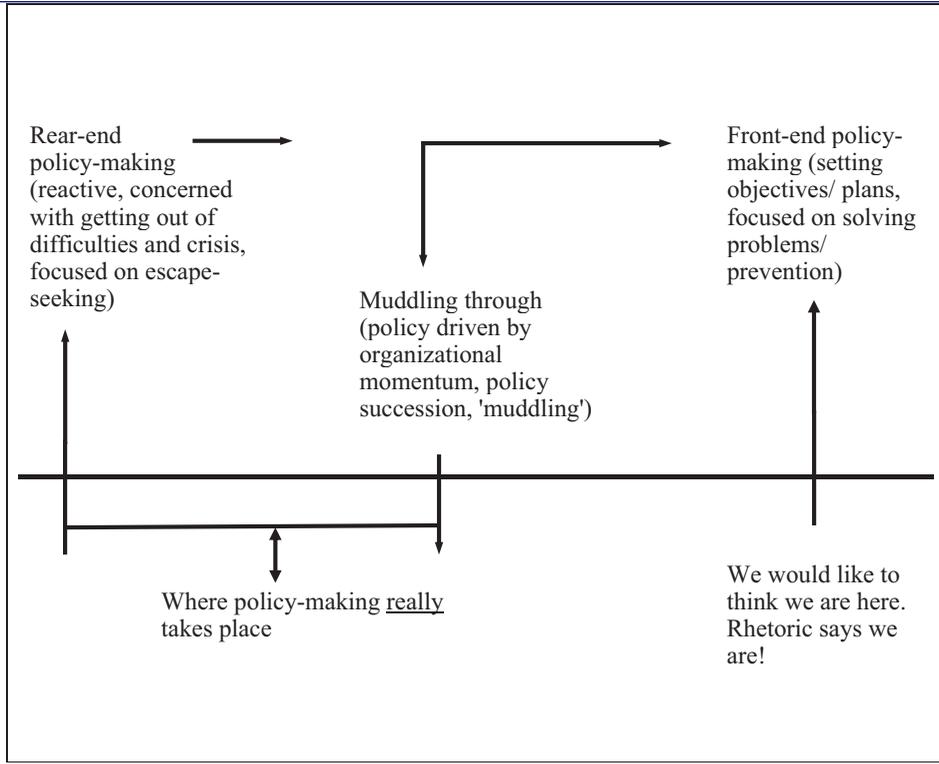
Haller's (1973) survey of curriculum commissions across the FRG was the most prominent example of empirical *research* animated by such ideas. He surveyed the practices of

curriculum commissions across the *Länder* and saw few examples of a modern or reformed practice: commission members were largely current and former teachers, almost randomly selected, who muddled through an informally organized writing process and ended up with draft documents that in almost all cases became the official guidelines shortly after their development. There was neither piloting nor evaluation, and any qualities associated with a rational, informed or research-based decision-making seemed to be missing. Ten or so years later, Haft and Hopmann's survey (see Hopmann, 1988a, 1988b, 1991a, 1991b), following up Haller's (1973) study, found that, by the end of the mid-1980s, little had changed since Haller's survey—and that most of the limited 'reforms' of the ways of working of curriculum commissions that had been introduced in the 1960s and 1970s had faded away.

This finding was to invite new and different questions about the structures and patterns of work associated with the German tradition of state curriculum-making. Thus, Haft and Hopmann (1990; see also Hopmann, 1988a) went on to argue that the German curriculum modernizers and/or reformers of the 1970s were wrong in their core assumptions around the curriculum-making of the *Länder*. They contended that reformers like Saul Robinsohn had seen curriculum-making as, first and foremost, *educational* decision-making that should be animated by systematic understandings of 'research' and/or best practices in schooling, curricula and teaching. From such a perspective, findings that curriculum commissions did *not* base their work on research or a validated 'best practice', or that commission members were not appointed on the basis of their research expertise, were disturbing.

Haft and Hopmann (1990; see also Hopmann, 1988a) went on to contend that such conclusions were valid *only* if it was assumed that curriculum commissions were undertaking *educational* work. They pointed out that the policy research undertaken in the wake of the social planning wave of the 1960s and 1970s had turned to investigations of the mechanisms that were active *within* actual policy-making—to show that it was not so much a rational process of research-based planning as an institutionalized muddling-through in turbulent environments (see, e.g. Lindbloom & Cohen, 1979, Parsons, 1995; see also Carlgren, 1995). Put another way, and as is suggested in Table 1, the rational-choice, educational planning models that had animated so much of the German research on the state's curriculum-making were idealizing reconstructions of very different processes. Haft and Hopmann went on to contend that curriculum commissions were 'instruments' or 'tools' available to ministries, departments and boards of education to *manage* the interfaces between public, party and political ('outsider') interests and the inner work of schools and professional and institutional interests in that work ('insider').

The political and educational context of schooling in the FRG in the 1960s and 1970s had also brought forward a preoccupation within educational research with the *legitimation* of school types, curricula, etc. Were, for example, school types such as comprehensive schools desirable forms of schooling for children? Why? Why not? How might the proposed comprehensive reorganization of schools of the 1960s and 1970s be given the necessary legitimation? The curriculum as a text or document is central to such deliberation. How do the texts issued by curriculum commissions secure a *public* authority and legitimacy as norm-setters? How do they secure a *professional* authority and legitimacy as norm-setters? These are central questions that a research model of state-based curriculum-making must seek to answer (see Kaiser, 1983, König, 1983, Weiler, 1988, 1990). Participatory public discussion can provide a discursive legitimation by way of communication among the groups necessarily engaged in curriculum-making—experts, teachers, pupils and parents.

**Table 1.** Muddling through.

Source: Parsons (1995, p. 607).

### Modelling state-based curriculum-making

As they approached an analysis of the work of state curriculum-making in Germany with the goal of understanding its 'rationality', Haft and Hopmann (1990) distinguished three different contexts for policy production around the school curriculum—with each domain following its own history, discourse, agenda, dynamics, constraints, etc. There is:

- A *political context*, that is a public/political/party-political discourse on education, schooling and the curriculum. Doyle (1992) identifies this context with societal and cultural themes, including such issues as workplace competence and skill development as well as the representation in the school of, e.g. 'the nation' and the nation's culture and moral values (e.g. family structures, 'character', conduct), etc.;
- a *school system, school and professional context* wherein curriculum guidelines give rationales and provide a language and forms for describing and steering the structures of schooling, the work of schools and teachers, and the programmes and credentialing of students; and,
- a context within the *public administration*, that is within ministries, departments and/or boards of education wherein (1) the expectations and policies as well as the 'languages' of education and the curriculum that are articulated within political contexts are given their due and packaged for school systems, schools and teachers; and (2) cultural and 'political' expectations as well as 'advanced' professional standards and

expectations are rendered into forms that are within the capacities of the practical traditions of schooling (see, e.g. Hart, 2001, 2002).

Hopmann (1988a; see also Haft & Hopmann, 1990) contends that such a framework—with its highlighting of the different, and often incommensurable, discourses around schooling and the curriculum—makes it possible to integrate many research findings from the prior German research on curriculum-making into a coherent framework centred on the themes of discourse and legitimacy.

Political or public discourse around the work of schools is different in character from the discourses around, and decision-making for, the day-by-day ‘inner work’ of schooling. The ‘schools’ of public discourse are very different in character from the schools of the ‘what-will-do-on-Monday-in-my-grade 8-science-lessons’ discourse of teachers and school people. ‘Practical’ decision-making around schooling and teaching is to be distinguished—and must be seen to be distinguished—from the ‘public’ and the ‘political’, wherever possible: the issue at hand in such decision-making is these groups of students in *these* schools in *these* communities, not the abstracted, generic ‘child’ or ‘adolescent’ of public and political discourse.

As with Connelly and Connelly’s (2008, 2010) analysis of Canadian state-based curriculum-making, Haft and Hopmann (1990) conclude that the curriculum-making of Germany’s *Länder* results in documents that are neither political nor educational/pedagogical in their basic character. *Rather, they are instruments for steering and managing the variety of discourses around schooling—from the viewpoint of public administrations.* Put in another way, Germany’s state-based curriculum-making is a tool around which public administrations can draw together and direct the multi-layered narratives that story and re-story the work of the school system. The successes and failures of curriculum documents as narratives storying the school are located in the communications and exchanges of an educational system’s leadership with its public/political worlds, the worlds of its teachers and education leaders, *and* their communities.

There are many resources available within the curriculum document to accomplish this work of exchange:

- the ways in which curricular areas or subjects are named and framed;
- the ‘subjects’ that might be formally available (and not available) and eligible for various credentials;
- the emphases, i.e. in time, placement and significance, given curriculum areas and subjects;
- the decisions about the groups for whom a given curriculum area or subject is targeted.

In other words, state-based curriculum-making is an activity that has its tasks, and its functionality, in its capacity to engage public, political, and professional, ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ networks of discourse about education and schooling towards a common, and at times ‘new’ understandings of the work of the schools. The curriculum offers a public meaning for and an interpretation of the work of the school and the experience of schooling—for the system at large, for the levels or kinds of schooling, for subjects. The ideas around schooling that are projected in curriculum documents give the idea of the school, if not actual schools, the ideological meaning that they require to sustain public support, that is secure legitimacy. In the words of Meyer and Scott (1992):

We take the view that organizational legitimacy refers to the degree of cultural support for an organization—the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence, functioning and jurisdiction, and lack or deny alternatives ... [*L*]egitimacy mainly refers to the adequacy of an organization as theory. (p. 201; emphases added)

Put another way, the discourses within and around the curriculum provide *narratives* within the terms of which public and professional communities can understand their schools, and teachers and schools can present and describe their work, and its meaning. Table 2 presents the table of contents of the Canadian province of Nova Scotia's 'Foundation for active, healthy living: Physical and health education curriculum' and Table 3 presents some

**Table 2.** Nova Scotia: Foundation for active, healthy living.

<b>Contents</b>	
<b>Vision</b>	
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>Equity and Diversity:</b>
Purpose of the Document	Roles within Education
Curriculum Focus: Active, Healthy Living	
Key Features of the Curriculum	
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Student's Role</li> <li>• The Caregiver's Role</li> <li>• The Community's Role</li> <li>• The Teachers Role</li> <li>• The Principal's Role</li> <li>• The Education System's Role</li> </ul>
Essential Graduation Learnings	
The Nature of Active, Healthy Living	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Learning Continuum</li> <li>• Unifying Ideas</li> </ul>	
<b>Curriculum Outcomes for Health Education: Grades Primary to 12</b>	<b>Assessing and Evaluating Student Learning</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organizing Strands for Physical Education</li> <li>• General Curriculum Outcomes</li> <li>• Key-Stage Curriculum Outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Evaluation</li> <li>• Reporting</li> <li>• Guiding Principles</li> </ul>
<b>Contexts for Learning and Teaching</b>	<b>Resources</b>
The Principles of Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction</li> <li>• Criteria for Selecting Resources</li> <li>• The Range of Resources</li> <li>• Controversial Texts and Issues</li> <li>• Community Resources</li> </ul>
Principles Underlying the Physical and Health Education Curriculum	
The Learning Environment	<b>References</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduction</li> <li>• Balance</li> <li>• Inclusion</li> <li>• Safety</li> <li>• Challenge</li> <li>• Inquiry</li> <li>• Resource-Based Learning</li> <li>• The Use of Technology</li> <li>• Interactive Learning</li> </ul>	

Source: Nova Scotia (1998).

**Table 3.** National statements articulating a need for curriculum-making and development.

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At the beginning of the 1990s the scope for adapting education and training to various kinds of pupils' needs was deemed insufficient. Efforts have to be made through the reforms to develop better ways of encouraging pupils' participating in their own learning and of expanding their opportunity to take charge of their own personal development.

*National report of Norway*

Laying a foundation for life-long learning in students and helping them to become good workers and members of the community is certainly a crucial aspect that will need to be taken into consideration when developing the system of education.

*National report of the Czech Republic*

Internationalization of the employment market. Political developments on a global scale such as the international nature of almost all aspects of life.

*National report of Germany*

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Source: Rosenmund (2006).

starting points for the larger narratives around the curricula of national school systems from the 1990s. By virtue of their definitions of the norms and/or 'standards' for schooling, the texts capture symbolically the movement of public aspirations for the schools into the inner work of the school (Hopmann, 1999).

The authority and legitimacy that the work of curriculum commissions and their documents seek to achieve is *not* an outcome of the arguments embedded in a curriculum's texts. Rather, it is an outcome of public and a professional acceptance of the *process* that has led to the 'new' text;

- its representativeness in terms of interests, its transparency and openness;
- its deference to public and professional symbols, slogans, preoccupations, etc.;
- the cultural fit of its discourse to what are seen (locally) as salient to the work of *this* curriculum commission, in this context and at this time;
- its acknowledgement of the professional and public understandings that are seen as fundamental to the rationale of the school.

This work falls in particular on the 'political' and public discussions that take place *within* the formal curriculum-making.

As Karseth and Sivesind (2010) have contended, such resolutions are *textual*—found in the white and green papers around the idea of new curricula that are submitted to legislatures, and/or in the introductory pages of the curriculum texts where rationales are commonly offered. As we have suggested, to be plausible, such explanations need to:

- (1) acknowledge the needs of the political/cultural subsystems that project their understandings of education and schooling as expectations for and demands on the *political system*; and,
- (2) (hopefully) provide concepts and symbols that instantiate these expectations in the work of a system's schools—as subject areas and programmes of study, subjects and courses, etc. (Doyle, 1992).

In other words, curriculum documents offer, and reflect, a text that school owners and leaders can point to in order to rationalize, legitimate and account for their schools. *In this way, instead of being understood as in some way 'imposed' by political decision-making—and thus remote from the 'real worlds' of pedagogy and schooling—the languages and narratives of the curriculum document are incorporated, if not into the inner practice of the school, into the*

*texts around the school.* Schools are thus branded, or rebranded, as responsive to the concerns of 'national' and local communities, and, hopefully, project the new frames into both the immediate naming and framing of school work and the developmental trajectories of school owners, schools and teachers. We will consider *how* this work or these tasks around the inner work of the school is accomplished through the instrument of the curriculum commission in a subsequent paper in *JCS*.

## The processes of state-based curriculum-making

As they discuss the first versions of the English National Curriculum, Bowe et al. (1992; see also Ball, 2006) highlight the curriculum's character as a 'text' that must be read and *interpreted* in the light of the presumptions, routines, expectations and/or scripts of its readers—and within the framing of the more or less closed, self-referential social/discourse systems in which the text is read. As we have noted, the curriculum 'exists' in both public/political worlds and within the worlds of schools of different levels and kinds. A curriculum 'text' with new mandates or recommendations on, say, gender integration in courses in cookery and/or automotive repair, 'active healthy living', or 'education and work' can, as Connelly and Connelly (2010, 2013) highlight, have value in 'party' contexts. It symbolizes an active government that is responsive to public/political agendas; or projects an imagined school practice. It has a different meaning in schools where, depending on how directive it might be in the short term, it entails greater or lesser changes in the routines of teachers and students. *To the extent that the interpretative starting points in different sites and/or settings, e.g. 'public opinion', political parties, teachers' communities of practice, schools in community, etc., vary more or less widely, the meaning and uptake of a curriculum document will also vary, more or less widely.*<sup>11</sup>

Bowe et al.'s (1992) discussions of the first years of the English National Curriculum—and the many other explorations of curricular contention in other places<sup>12</sup>—also illuminate the potential for contest and debate that can emerge around the different readings of the curriculum-as-platform. *However, such a focus on debate, contention, and the incommensurability of viewpoints around curricula and curriculum-making does not capture the character of the routinized curriculum work undertaken in the more settled institutional frames of, say, Sweden and Finland, of Germany's Länder, or Canada's provinces.* There the public administration's curriculum-makers, with their institutional memories and understanding of 'their' systems of schools and their stakeholders, are all too aware that their curriculum documents must address the interests of all parties with stakes in the schools and the curriculum. Furthermore they acknowledge this must be done without creating the contention and argument that complicates the *legitimacy* of a curriculum-document-as-text—within the worlds of their political and agency leaders *and* of the schools that must work within the frames of the documents they develop. In the next papers from the OCC project *JCS*, (Sivesind & Westbury, 2016; Westbury, 2016) will begin this task as they examine the structures and decision-making trajectories that led to the *Illinois Learning Standards* and the Norway's *The Curriculum for the 10-Year Compulsory School in Norway*, both from 1997.

## Notes

1. For a brief history of state curriculum-making in France, see Hörner (2007).

2. The studies are based on curriculum commissions in Finland, Germany, Norway, Switzerland and the US (Illinois).
3. That is, royal or presidential commissions, commissions of inquiry, etc.; see, e.g. Gilligan (2002), Prasser (1994), Sheriff (1983).
4. Note that Geraldine Connelly was Director of Curriculum in the Ontario Ministry of Education and Director of the Toronto, Canada, Metropolitan School Board.
5. For a classical presentation of a US viewpoint on political interest in the curriculum, see Lippmann (1928). For recent example of a political/professional debate, see Evans (2011).
6. Curriculum is '[t]he reconstruction of knowledge and experience that enables the learner to grow in exercising intelligent control of subsequent knowledge and experience' (Daniel Tanner and Laurel Tanner; quoted in Ellis, 2004, p. 5).
7. For a classical German discussion of these issues around state-based curriculum-making, see Weniger (1930, 1952, 2000); see also Frey (1971, 1975) and Mølstad and Hansén (2013).
8. For an example of such work from Sweden, see Husén and Dahlöf (1960).
9. See Achtenhagen and Meyer (1971), Frey (1971, 1975, 1986), Haft and Hameyer (1975), Hameyer, Frey, and Haft (1983).
10. See Westbury (2000).
11. For an analysis of an instance of such different readings of one National Curriculum document, see Roberts (1995); see also Spillane (2004).
12. See, e.g. Apple (2008) and Wixson et al. (2004) for the US; Ellerton and Clements (1994) for Australia; Koritzinsky (2000, 2001) and Løvlie (1998) for Norway; Milburn (1996) for Canada; Crawford (1995), Evans (2011) and McFee and Tomlinson (1993) for England.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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