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An Officially Endorsed National Curriculum: Institutional Boundaries and Ideational Concerns

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Recently, there has been a notable renewal in nationalisation processes, which has had consequences on public policies and curriculum development in different countries (Winter 2018). There are both pros and cons associated with this development; increased nationalism can favour a kind of populism that hinders a society from adequately acting upon global problems, or national movements can result in domestic unification as people defend their democratic rights using institutional boundaries (Calhoun 2007; Hroch 1996). National movements can, for example, justify public education as an egalitarian project to guarantee democratic rights for all citizens. This was the case for the populist movement that evolved in the last part of the 19th century within the Nordic countries, where a folk movement served as a counter-force to state regulations that did not take egalitarian values and people's interests into account (Jarning 1998; Lauglo 1995). It is from the viewpoint of relational power developed through local deliberations and public endorsement that this article examines a set of rationales for developing a national curriculum.

In order to describe an officially endorsed national curriculum, we will briefly explore the history of Nordic reforms, particularly focusing on curriculum development in Norway, where institutional policies and populist movements established rationales for setting norms to create a unified school system during the 19th and 20th centuries (Sivesind 2008). This education system was intended to establish a common ground regarding what to teach in schools and how to relate to local constituencies. This was done to ensure that students, independent of their background, would have the same potential to develop their own lives as citizens. Although it was locally oriented, the system, including curricula, also aimed to provide knowledge and enlightenment to guide students to become educated citizens, a process that is called *Bildung* in German, *bildning* in Swedish and *danning* in Norwegian (Karseth and Sivesind 2010).

In the first section of this article, we briefly clarify what is meant by 'an officially endorsed national curriculum'. The next section provides a brief overview of how national curricula have been developed in Norway to make a unified public school system egalitarian. Thereafter, we present how ongoing curriculum renewals and standard-based reforms create openness to the surrounding society while simultaneously conveying expectations about the ideal citizen. Synthesised narratives about what to teach in schools were replaced by a set of objectives regarding the development of competence for the future, which defined what students should learn and how they should be socialised to become global citizens. It is uncertain whether this approach keeps its promises (i.e. to promote democratic deliberation and public support from parents and stake holders), an issue on which we will comment within the last part of the article.

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An officially endorsed national curriculum

The term 'curriculum' has many connotations, depending on its place of origin, application and relevance. In Europe, curricula referred to as *Lerhplan* (German) or *læreplan* (Norwegian) are traditionally associated with a formal text. This document authorises the subject matter to be taught in schools and indirectly determines what certain groups of students are expected to learn from the moment they are enrolled within a school system until they complete their program of study (Reid 1999). Since these types of curricula determine a course of study from its beginning to end, they are not merely products of the activities going on within an education system. Rather, they have to be interpreted within a particular context as both texts and processes.

As a democratic pursuit, a formal curriculum has been a focus for both nation-states and federal states. It is a subject that often gains public attention and is considered significant for all those who are engaged in coordination and preparation of teaching and learning in schools. In line with Hopmann (1999), who argues that a formal curriculum cannot guarantee standards by itself, we contend that a formally endorsed national curriculum can only shape practices deliberately, when practitioners use their discretion to judge the quality of students' learning in schools.

From a public point of view, a national curriculum must first be publicly recognised and agreed upon through hearings and consultations before being endorsed. Second, within a practical context, a curriculum may guide actions through a set of norms and define subject matter and content that is relevant to accomplishment of these norms, which are later interpreted and transformed through local practices. However, a national curriculum cannot guarantee what is actually taught and learnt in schools because publicly endorsed national curricula in Norway and other Nordic countries have traditionally been open-ended and dependent on teachers' and school leaders' local work and judgements. Third, there is no doubt that formal written curricula can enable public discourse. Such discourse will align with the Nordic tradition, and the curricula may not guarantee human rights inherently, but will do so through mediation of processes and practices in which students learn, develop and grow (Englund 1986). From this perspective, a curriculum reflects processes beyond what can be considered a product of political decision-making; a deliberative approach sustains a democratic system at both the local and national level and is indirectly coordinated by national authorities in line with populist traditions.

In order to fulfil this purpose, the public system is enacted by a negative coordination mechanism that defines roles and responsibilities, both politically and within the education system (Hopmann 1999). The negative mechanism implies that those in power cannot control others without a public license and endorsement to do so, which may be provided by formal mandates and norms as well as support from the surrounding society. For this reason, a national government cannot steer bodies or people by standards and cognitive expectations alone. Rather, those with the formal power to govern the system have to provide services to the population in which they restrict their own influence and allow for professional and personal autonomy and self-control. This approach implies that a curriculum creates a space for action without positively regulating meaning-making processes (Bachmann and Sivesind 2012). Thus, enactment of a formal curriculum is dependent upon local practices in schools.

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National curricula: how they developed

Curriculum guidelines are not new in Norway; they are part of a tradition that dates back to 1739, when elementary schooling became legally mandatory in *rural*ⁱ districts. Until the last part of the 19th century, guidelines regarding the organisation of teaching in *rural*ⁱⁱ districts, including parishes and, later, municipalities, were enacted through decrees. The first plans were inspired by decrees formulated by Danish Lutheran intellectuals who promoted reform of both the church and school system (Tröhler 2016).

The Proposal of School Plans for Public Elementary Schools for General Education in the Rural Districts, published in 1890, built upon the 1889 New School Act, and it is considered a milestone in Norway's curriculum history (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1890). With chapters on grading, examinations and scheduling of lessons, aims, objectives and methodological advice, it offered a normative structure for organisation of schooling in *rural*ⁱⁱⁱ districts. Curriculum researchers consider the 1890 proposal to be the first national curriculum for general schooling in Norway (Engelsen 2003; Gundem 1993a, 1993b).

The 1922 and 1925 curricula extended this model by describing what to teach within the normative guidelines. They were written for practical use in schools at a point in time when the economic conditions for organising schooling were very poor and when large part of the population suffered due to the Great Depression (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1922: 100). Both curricula provided pedagogical advice to teachers, which became a typical characteristic of curricula in Norway and neighbouring countries (Hopmann 1999). Between 1890 and 1939, it was up to municipalities to determine whether they wanted to follow these curricula. However, after the Primary School Education Act of 1936 and the creation of the Normalplans in 1939 (N39), a centralised approach was adopted.

During World War II, Nazis tried to replace the curricula for some subjects, but profound resistance among teachers ruined this plan (Telhaug and Mediås 2003). A key element for the development of a democratic school system was a new approach to teaching that prioritised the student. The N39 plans, which served as official guidelines until the 1970s, promoted reformed pedagogy that emphasised learning by doing and active students, inspired by Scandinavian and American scholars and intellectuals such as John Dewey and Ellen Key. The curricula were also influenced by the goals of empirical research and authorised content standards to be achieved by students at certain stages in their schooling. However, these curricula were limited by what a formal regulation can accomplish and thereby were enacted through a negative mechanism. For this and other reasons, the N39 curricula have become iconic in the history of Norwegian curricula.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the newly established National Council for Innovation in Education organised research projects and experiments in Norway and in the neighbouring country of Sweden. These research projects had significant impact on curricula. For example, they promoted the idea of differentiating groups of students within a unified school system by grouping students into learning tracks at the lower secondary level based on soft cognitive standards. The choice to enrol in these tracks was made by the students and their parents alone, since there was no system in place to assess who

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would be placed at different levels. Thus, the experiment was conducted without positive coordination by teachers or any person with formal power in the education system.

This reform activity resulted in a provisional plan called the 1960 Curriculum, which lay the foundation for curricula for the last three years in a new nine-year compulsory school model which was successively implemented in the 1970s (Forsøksrådet for skoleverket 1960). The Curriculum 1974 (M74) was the first mandatory curriculum for a nine-year compulsory school, and it did not involve standardised tracks that permanently divided groups of students within the compulsory school system (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1974). Again, norms that took all students' interests into account was the foundational idea and overall goal of the unifying school system.

After 1985, all schools in Norway were obliged to implement a set of goals defined by the new curriculum. The final version of this document, which was published in 1987, included a set of objectives that were compulsory for all students between the ages of 7 and 16 and is considered a major break from the locally based tradition (Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementet 1974, 1987). However, teachers and school leaders could tailor their own curricula to local community practices. Again, the national plan had a double purpose to handle the local/national dilemma; it introduced the concept of management by objectives, which has been a core strategy in curriculum reforms ever since (i.e. in the reforms of 1993, 1997 and 2006). All of these reforms were introduced in a period in which political and professional ideas that legitimise new test systems and accountability control systems have changed curricula into new types of documents. However, only the last one, the Knowledge Promotion reform of 2006, included the concept of generic skills and adjusted the curriculum to a framework for assessment and evaluation (Sivesind and Bachmann 2008). This curriculum has been renewed through curriculum-making processes involving stakeholders, professionals, researchers, politicians and different kinds of associations.

We claim that the history of the Norwegian educational system and curricula is a success story lasting from 1739 until 2020, when the new curriculum will be formally launched. The number of national curriculum documents published from 1890 onwards demonstrates that this history has involved societal and ideological shifts as well as stability and enduring patterns that have, despite being determined by national governments, opened up local deliberation and public endorsement about what should be taught in schools. Local actors and populist movements, which served as a counter-force when defining the content of reforms, can partly explain how the Nordic education model arose during the late 19th and early 20th century. However, it is uncertain whether this model will sustain during the 20th century.

Does the idea of a national curriculum still make sense?

In this article, we argue that officially endorsed national curricula are dependent on a set of institutional boundaries and are rooted in deliberations and discourses that justify public schooling as an enlightenment project. By addressing the needs of the whole population and gaining legitimacy through local democratic processes, this project developed into an egalitarian system during the 20th century. Thus, the curricula served a double purpose: to represent formalised decisions of a representative

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democratic system about what and how to teach and to promote liberal values by stimulating democratic deliberative dialogues and endorsements from the public. It is interesting to examine whether this kind of system—and officially endorsed national curricula—are relevant today.

Institutional boundaries allowing for the promotion of egalitarian norms within education may be considered a result of the political ambition of the policy of a welfare state. Looking to history, Sivesind and Trætteberg (2017) argue that the Nordic welfare model differs from the market economy and socialism by combining public benefits, such as an education system for all, with redistribution of economic sources across social classes. It is within this tradition that curricula have been formulated both to create equal opportunities for all, independent of race, sex, class and religion, and to create spaces for individuals to construct their own lives in line with the liberal-democratic tradition (Dale 2011). Creation of the same work conditions for men and women was another political idea proposed by the Nordic welfare model.

However, when writing about the Nordic welfare model today, one should keep in mind that it is no longer a hegemonic model due to national differences within the Nordic region and its transformation during the 21st century (Sivesind and Wahlström 2016). Characteristics of this transformation include, according to Sivesind and Trætteberg (2017), a reduction of public debt, simplified and lowered taxes, new pension systems and openness to development of innovative and knowledge-intensive economies. In these economies, private actors act as consultants and provide services on behalf of the state. The idea of education as a public good characterises this transformation from a professional-bureaucratic conception of education as both an end and a mean to a post-bureaucratic conception in which education is no longer a value in itself, but assessed and developed on behalf of a society to strengthen the role of quasi-markets (Maroy 2012).

Currently, throughout the Nordic countries, a set of international systems and expectations seem to determine the agenda for formulation of a national curriculum. New policies in the curriculum domain advocate test systems and thereby test-based accountability as the mean to align policies and practices at national and international levels. There is an international trend of complementing curricula with test systems and collaboration between states and governmental and nongovernmental organisations to develop standards and align examination systems, school inspection policies and similar inventions (Addey et al. 2017). A core purpose of this project is to improve learning outcomes (Nordin and Sundberg 2016; Wahlström 2016).

The Knowledge Promotion reform, which was launched in Norway in 2006, reflects this shift. It includes competence aims and transversal skills and is accompanied by a quality assurance system involving national tests and international large-scale assessments (Møller and Skedsmo 2013). The ongoing renewal of this curriculum includes core elements and values, which serve as linking mechanisms that align competence aims, transversal skills, disciplinary and cross-disciplinary knowledge and principles for how to organise local curricula within and across a range of subjects. The purposes of alignment and the use of new technology are considered new features of this renewal process that serve as key tools during implementation of the curriculum and renewal of different parts of the curriculum into a coherent system.

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In this case, an assessment is used as a political tool to guarantee the quality of education systems by replacing normative ideas about what and how to teach with conceptions about what to learn (Sivesind et al. 2016). In this kind of system, standardised expectations for how and what individuals are going to learn becomes the framing idea for how to transform existing curricula. The new curricula expect students to master instrumental knowledge, abilities and skills as well as develop secondary virtues, which in themselves do not indicate how they will act as future citizens in the service of a human liberal-democratic system. Governance strategies do not imply that learners learn within non-affirmative frameworks, but they ask for positive confirmation and a guarantee that knowledge and skills are learnt and attitudes are developed. This kind of curriculum is different from earlier curricula, as it allows for external positive control by defining shared values but lacks synthesizing narratives, which enabled schools to perform self-control until the 2000s.

This new approach leads to a paradox in contemporary curriculum policies. Today, curricula and school reforms are not capable of creating boundaries that protect schools and students from external influences to the same degree as curricula developed in the 20th century. Also, they are not endorsed in the same way by the public, since several parties and movements can influence curriculum-making and multiply external political forces. This might be the reason why international assessment frameworks and standard-based curricula specify what it means to be a fully integrated national and world citizen. To set the reform agenda and control the outcomes, assessment frameworks replace national curricula, or at least transform them into new toolkits or means.

This ideational approach differs from the institutional-normative approach and counter-populist movements aimed at deliberative processes. New outcome-based frameworks demand evidence-informed practices and assessments that judge students in terms of their performance and behaviour. Rather than nurturing the development of pluralistic world views and formalised orientations to religious education, standards define the goals and parameters for living as a citizen. Due to the lack of institutional frames and ignorance regarding the negative-coordinating mechanism, a pluralistic orientation to religion and ethical values is not beneficial for curriculum development. This means that conflicting themes are omitted from the national curriculum.

It is our view that, due to the lack of institutional frames, the renewed interest in generic competencies within national curricula paves the way for populist movements that are crisis-oriented and increasingly more self-referential. In countries in which national curricula have been developed by state-authorised bodies and legitimised by local and national deliberations, dilemmas related to cultural differences, political ruptures and technological innovation could be handled in argumentative ways. If a curriculum defines and standardises the processes and outcomes with definitions and solutions, the argumentative space is neither in the hands of the public nor of local constituencies.

So far, researchers and experts involved in curriculum-making processes in different contexts have been aware of these threats. A nation-state's work on a new curriculum or revision of an already authorised curriculum can consciously address contemporary issues and problems by encouraging deliberation and discourse among all involved. In this case an officially endorsed curriculum to have to be re-invented. However, this may not necessarily happen in the next few decades due to the use of technology that

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standardises education beyond what can be ideationally disputed. Thus, we ask the following question by a modest doubt and a hope: Do national governments shape their systems with new types of knowledge and technologies that ignore the idea of a publicly endorsed curriculum, or do they continue to construct institutional boundaries that allow for local deliberation and public endorsement?

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