

Non-affirmative education theory and discursive institutionalism as possibilities for curriculum research

A foreword

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This special issue aims at advancing *curriculum research in a transnational perspective* by the help of both a critical, Bildung centered, non-affirmative education theory (eg. Benner, 2015; Uljens, 2001; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017) and discursive institutionalism (e.g. Schmidt, 2008; Nordin & Sundberg, 2018; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). The intention is to explore how non-affirmative education theory as an approach in general theory of education, might be fruitful for understanding of how different actors and practices, at different levels of the education system, within nation-states, with their different, historically developed education policies, mediate between the transnational, national, regional and local levels? We ask how non-affirmative theory of education can be utilized as a frame of reference in exploring both curriculum reform work, teaching and educational leadership? We also ask, can discursive institutionalism operate as a complementary approach to education or curriculum theory, in understanding how educational policies, ideas and values relate to governance processes and educational practice at different levels?

It may be that a combination of these approaches can help us to become better equipped to handle *reform of curriculum, leadership and teaching* in relation to the *contents of curriculum*, that is, in relation to the intentions, contents and teaching methods and school culture. Non-affirmative theory of education is considered fit for these purposes as it offers conceptual tools for understanding both a) the *pedagogical* dimensions of curriculum reform activity as a multi-level process especially focusing the relation between education and politics, culture and economy, and b) by opening up the teaching-studying-learning process by providing a relational theory of pedagogical practice. How is this accomplished? First, non-affirmative education theory assumes a non-hierarchical relation between politics and education, thereby opening up this relation as aporical, and as a discursive practice and critical reflection. In other words, how do political intentions transform into curricula and practice? And, as a parallel question, how does educational practice simultaneously prepare for political, cultural and economic citizenship? Here, an object for reflection is how a given



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curriculum defines its educational ideas and aims, the selection and selected contents at different levels, as well as values, methods of teaching and learning, collaboration, leadership and evaluation. Educational practice in schools typically operate in the tension between political, cultural, economical and private (families) interests, but also reflect such interests. Analytically we may, with non-affirmative theory ask what degrees of freedom schools have in mediating between the students and these external interests? From a normative perspective, non-affirmative education theory explains that schools on the one hand have to acknowledge and recognize the existence of external interests of various kinds including parental interests and state policies, but on the other hand, schools cannot be expected or forced to affirm these interests. If education would not only acknowledge and recognize such interests, but also be forced to *affirm* external interests, then practitioners would be hindered from creating such pedagogical spaces in schools that allow the students to relate themselves reflexively to established or intended cultural, economical and political practices. In choosing such a position non-affirmative theory positions itself as a critical theory, but at the same time seeking a position beyond typical instrumental and strongly normative ideology critical positions. Both of these tend to include ready-made answers regarding how education should be used for transforming the society, thus leaving little room for teachers to engage in true dialogue about the meaning of education or for students meaning making.

However, non-affirmative education theory, exemplifying German-Nordic *general theory of education* (e.g. Benner, 2015; Uljens, 2001), has primarily theorized education within a nation-state perspective. Given the *globopolitan* condition, this approach may need to be completed with perspectives developed within policy research to be able of handling *transnational policy* influences. In this respect, Schmidt's (2008) *discursive institutionalism* may provide a different point of departure to consider the "institutional" or "structural" dimensions, particularly those that are evident in later deliberative and discourse-oriented curriculum theory. Discourse-oriented curriculum research provides a language for talking about the human interactive and interpersonal dimensions of any level, from classroom to transnational. Discursive institutionalism acknowledges the system—laws, policy documents, task descriptions, financing systems—that lies beyond individuals' everyday leadership practices. According to Schmidt, 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. This point explains the interplay among societal values and aims, policies, and program interactions. 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* refer to policy legitimization between policy actors and the general public.

Vivien Schmidt's way of approaching institutionalism, as a discursive version of it, taking the notion of ideas seriously, is in many ways coherent with non-affirmative education theory. Both accept an open, non-hierarchic or non-linear, relation between societal practices. Such an understanding of the relation between e.g. politics and education constitute a



negotiating, dialogical or discursive character of this relation. In this view, societal practices like politics and education are dependent of and influence each other, but they cannot be derived from each other. However, with its grounding in public administration and political sciences, Schmidt's (2008) discursive institutionalism does not have any underlying theory of education. Therefore, assuming that curriculum is an object of educational research and theorizing, curriculum research applying discursive institutionalism need to ground in education theory. Non-affirmative education theory then offer the language for understanding curriculum and other pedagogical human-institutional interactions, including those concerning the broader system (e.g. law, policy documents), as pedagogical phenomena.

Authoring this foreword I am for the time being engaged in reflecting comparative curriculum and leadership research together with colleagues at East China Normal University in Shanghai. It is remarkable how a cultural and geographical relocation summons oneself to rethink established patterns of thought. Perhaps this is what a part of philosophical reflection is about? To invite the world to challenge one's own conceptions, while at the same time to challenge the world with one's conceptions. China, with its version of Marxist ideology today promotes competition and evidence driven development on the education sector, clearly following a neoliberal logic of governance, while Finland, as a market economy, strongly opposes such competitive patterns, instead focusing on taking care of those in need of more support. In a *globopolitan* perspective, the challenges are the same for us all. This is why transnational inquiry into curriculum issues is so much required.

Notes

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