Curriculum development as a complex policy process in Denmark and Germany

Two cases of competence-oriented curricula in social science education

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Introduction

This chapter is a contribution to research on the analysis of curricula, and more specifically analysis of the decision-making processes leading to the formulation of curricula in a specific context. I take a comparative view in two cases: (1) the processes leading up to the formulation of curricula for social science education in lower secondary school in Denmark in 2014, and (2) the discussion of national standards for ‘politische Bildung’ (political education or civic education) in Germany in 2004 and its effect on state-level curricula.

In both countries, these processes were directly tied to developments and initiatives originating from international organisations, in particular the OECD and its PISA programme and the EU with its European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (EC, 2008). In the German case, the Academic Society for Civic Education, the GPJE (Society for Civic Education Didactics and Civic Youth and Adult Education, <http://gpje.de/>) proposed a framework for national standards for ‘politische Bildung’ in 2004 that made direct reference to the PISA results (Detjen et al., 2004). This proposal had a direct influence on curricula in some states in Germany. In the Danish case, the EQF adopted by the European Commission (EC, 2008) served as a framework guiding the formulation of curricula for the Danish Folkeskole (primary and lower secondary school) (UVM, 2015).

In both cases, the concept of competence was central; and both cases can be seen as instances of the general shift from content-based to outcome- or competence-based curricula (Young and Allais, 2011). But, as I will show, the process is not uniform, and the interpretations of the concept of competence are different.

The question is how to best analyse this process. From one perspective – which I will describe as a top-down perspective – this is, as Krejsler et al. describe it, a development that “Scandinavian education finds itself increasingly compelled to follow” (Krejsler, Olsson and Petersson, 2014, p. 174), thus reducing the scope for action by state-level actors to mere compliance with international standards.

This view is similar to the perspective of Michael Young and Stephanie Allais, who also see the shift to outcomes-based qualifications as linked to the “marketization of education” (Young and Allais, 2011, p. 3).

A different perspective sees the decision-making processes in the European states as a complex multi-level decision process, or ‘soft governance’. I discuss later in the chapter whether using the concept of *demoi-cracy* can clarify and at the same time bring nuances to the discussion (Borrás and Conzelmann, 2007; Borrás and Radaelli, 2014; Cheneval, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2014). This proposed perspective is comparable to the “discursive institutionalism” proposed by Wahlström and Sundberg, which also takes a multi-level view of the decision process, distinguishing between four levels: the classroom, the local (municipality) level, the programmatic (transnational and national) level, and the institutional/societal level (transnational and national policy arenas) (2018, p. 171). In this chapter, I focus on the institutional level (the decision process) and the programmatic level (the formal curriculum), and I use a normative theoretical framework, discussing the process in light of theories of democracy.

In the following sections, I will first give an overview of the international background to educational policy, including the central actors, the OECD and the EU, followed by a brief discussion of theoretical approaches to policy-making. After that I will discuss the two cases: first, that of civic education in Germany and, afterwards, that of the development of the social science curriculum in Denmark. Following that, I will give a comparative view of what is common and what is distinct in the two cases. Finally, I will discuss how we may analyse policy developments in curricula from an international point of view, taking into account questions of democracy as well as the curriculum and Didaktik traditions.

The international background in educational policy

Educational policy is traditionally regarded as a matter for national governments. Education has been considered important for nation-building, both in terms of creating a feeling (sentiment) of allegiance to the state and of creating the foundation for economic development through education.

Globalisation, on the other hand, influences educational policies – but in which ways? In the 1990s, with the opening up of Europe and the eastern enlargement of the EU following the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was a widespread expectation that globalisation would lead to a dissemination of democracy and a stabilisation of liberal democracy as a widely accepted form of government (Fukuyama, 1992). More recently, education and educational policy have been seen as a vehicle for developing state competitiveness in an international economy in which globalisation means international competition. This was the motivating force behind the OECD and the European Union becoming more active in education.

When evaluating globalisation and the influence of international organisations on educational policies, it is important to take into account that organisations such as the OECD and the EU differ both in the aims of their work and in the capabilities they have for exercising influence on national policies. The OECD is the organisation for economic cooperation and development, and as an international organisation of sovereign members, it does not exert direct influence on the educational policies of its members. But indirectly it has had an important influence, in particular through international comparisons such as the PISA tests, but also by way of more theoretical publications, such as the DeSeCo project (Definition and Selection of Competencies) (Fratczak-Runicka and Torney-Purta, 2003; OECD, 2005). The European Union, on the other hand, given that it has law-making capability through regulations and directives that are legally binding on member states, has different possibilities for influencing policies. Therefore, it is also relevant to discuss the law-making process and the way the EU influences the law-making process in member states in the light of a theory of democracy.

Theoretical approaches to international influences on policymaking in education

The analysis of developments in the curriculum – and here I am focusing on the formal curriculum, that is, the legally binding guidelines for teaching in schools – can investigate both content and the decision-making process. In the following, I will do both. In the first place, I will be looking at how the concept of competence enters the curriculum debate and how it becomes a part of the curriculum. This is probably the most interesting aspect from a pedagogical/educational point of view, as it deals with the content of education. Second, I will focus on the process of decision-making in order to give a description of this and also to discuss how we may evaluate the degree of democracy in the process. This is particularly interesting when working with educational policies in an international perspective. Are the international processes undermining the (national) democracies, or is an international organisation like the EU providing a new forum for an international approach to way of democracy?

In the analysis of the international decision-making process, I distinguish between two perspectives. One of these sees the international influence on curriculum-making as a top-down process in which local decision-makers are subject to international hegemony. This is the perspective presented, for instance, by Krejsler and colleagues in their description of an ‘international grip’ on Scandinavian educational reform (Krejsler, Olsson and Petersson, 2014). A different perspective sees the European decision-making process possibly as a new form of democracy, a democracy of more than one people or *demos*, as expressed in the term *demoi-cracy* (*demoi* being the plural of *demos*), using a term originally coined by Joseph Weiler (1999). In this view, international institutions such as the EU can be a democratic possibility in a globalised

world, creating institutions that can match the global structures that influence local circumstances.

The case of ‘politische Bildung’ in Germany

In the following I will discuss the development in the curricula for ‘politische Bildung’ in Germany. This is complicated, among other reasons because Germany is divided into 16 federal states, each of which has its own educational policy.

On a national level, the conference of the ministers of culture (*Kultusministerkonferenz*) plays a role in, for instance, taking common decisions on national standards, but generally the responsibility for the educational system is at the state level, and that is where decisions are made. It also means that the structure of the school system (to some extent) and the curriculum, as well as the content of the curriculum, are decided at the state level. Some subjects differ in the curriculum, and relevant in this case is that the subject that entails what in Germany is known as ‘politische Bildung’ has different names, and content, such as politics (*Politik*) or social science (*Socialkunde*), or politics and economy (*Politik und Wirtschaft*) (Töpfer, 2017).

In my investigation I have looked at curricula in the various different states in the subjects of social studies (*Socialkunde*); politics/economics (*Politik/Wirtschaft*); political education (*politische Bildung*); and politics, society, and economy (*Politik-Gesellschaft-Wirtschaft*) (Christensen, 2017, p. 263). All these curricula have some description of competence relevant to political education, and this has been the focus of my investigation. The fact that the subjects are not the same is an example of how the study of the curriculum must not only be comparative between countries but also within a country. And it must be noted that this investigation takes only the formal curriculum into account, not the perceived or taught curriculum (Goodlad, Klein and Nye, 1979; Glatthorn et al., 2015).

The development of curricula in political education in Germany

The German tradition of Didaktik means that the teacher has (at least in theory) a degree of freedom and responsibility regarding the content and method in teaching. This, again, means that the formal curriculum (*Lehrpläne*) is less detailed regarding content (Westbury, 2000, p. 17). In practice, however, the formal curricula are at least detailed enough to be relevant in an investigation of the content.

In this section, I focus on how formal curricula with content within civic education have developed in Germany since 2004 in some states. In that year, the GPJE published a proposal for national standards in political and civic education that had a direct influence on the curricula in some states and an indirect

influence in others (Detjen et al., 2004). The initiative for the proposal was taken for two reasons: first, because of the PISA reports and the mediocre performance of German schoolchildren in these tests, and second, because the conference of the ministers of culture was working on proposals for general standards in the school subjects, and because the members of the GPJE had an interest in influencing that process.

In this light, the GPJE proposal can be seen as a reaction to an international political situation in which actions by international actors (in this case the OECD as an intergovernmental organisation) and national institutional actors (the conference of the ministers of culture) had had an effect on local actors (in this case, the GPJE). It should be noted that the GPJE's action actually anticipated the decision by the formal institution. From one point of view they can be seen to have been acting proactively; from a different point of view, this is a case of what Foucault calls governmentality, which can have the effect that there is no need to change the legislation because the actors already have anticipated the political agenda.

I will not go into detail with the proposal but call attention to two points that can be seen as elemental parts of the international trend: the focus on competence, and the focus on output and measurability. The focus on competence in the proposal is very clear, and it centres around a model of competence areas for 'politische Bildung'. These areas are described as (1) political power of judgement, (2) political ability to act, and (3) methodological abilities. All are fitted into a frame of "conceptual interpretation knowledge" (Detjen et al., 2004, p. 13). As regards the focus on output, this shows in that this is a proposal for standards, and that its third chapter is dedicated to giving examples of standards, expressed in the form of what students should be able to do at the various different levels of their education (Detjen et al., 2004, pp. 19–29).

Competence in the German pedagogical discourse

The focus on competence has been an international trend in education, with the OECD acting and exercising an influence through its publications, including the DeSeCo project (OECD, 2005) and the PISA reports. In Germany, a report from the conference of ministers of culture published in 2003 gave a proposal on how to formulate standards for education at all levels (Klieme et al., 2007). In this report, competencies are understood (in my translation) as cognitive skills for the solution of specific problems as well as the motivational and volitional disposition to use these with success and responsibility (Klieme et al., 2007, p. 71).

A different approach to competence that has had a huge influence in Germany dates back to 1971, when Heinrich Roth published a definition of competence including self-competence, subject competence, method competence, and social competence (Roth, 1971). This was later further developed with the concept of action competence (*Handlungskompetenz*), which has been included

in several curricula, for instance Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Detjen et al., 2012, p. 19; Bois et al., 2002).

In the GPJE proposal, as mentioned, the competence areas in political education are described as consisting of three areas (or domains): political power of judgement, ability to act politically, and methodological competence (Detjen et al., 2004). This model has been further developed, used, and also criticised in several publications. While some authors seek to broaden the model and formulate a more comprehensive model for civic education (AF, 2016), others have worked on developing a model of political competence (Detjen et al., 2012; Weißenö et al., 2010).

The proposal from the GPJE did not lead to the formulation of national standards for civic education, as the conference of the ministers of culture decided not to formulate standards for all subjects, but it did have an impact on curricula in several states, most notably in Berlin-Brandenburg, where it was implemented directly (even though it was subsequently changed once again). In other states, a combination of the Mecklenburg-Vorpommern model and the GPJE model was implemented (Christensen, 2017, p. 263).

To sum up, development in the curricula for ‘politische Bildung’ in Germany was influenced by international developments and by international actors such as the OECD; but the political structure in the country, both on a national level and at the level of the federal states, was also important. Furthermore, the existence of a community of scholars in the field has also influenced the way curricula are formulated.

The social science curriculum in Denmark

In Denmark, schools are the responsibility of the municipality, but the general guidelines, including the overarching curriculum, are set by the government. According to the format established in 1995, the published curricula include the definition of a set of areas of knowledge and skills and a guiding reading plan (*vejledende læreplan*). The municipality can either accept these definitions (which happens in almost all cases) or they can decide on a local reading plan. It has also been regarded as important in Denmark that teachers have freedom of method (Thejsen, 1997). This principle can perhaps be seen as an expression of the ideal of Didaktik: that the teacher has both the professional responsibility and the freedom to decide on what will go on in the classroom. Nevertheless, freedom of method has not been described formally in the legal documents and guidelines for the Danish Folkeskole, and it has been widely discussed and contested in the debate following the reform of 2014.

With the reform of 2014, the curriculum for both primary and lower secondary school in Denmark changed. The reform of the curricula, it was decided, should follow a set of guidelines intended to follow standards for competences set out in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In the EQF, competence is defined as:

the proven ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and personal development. In the context of the European Qualifications Framework, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

(EC, 2008, p. 11)

In the guidelines for the developers, the curriculum is described using competence goals that are on a higher level, and the goals for knowledge and skills form part of the competence. For instance, in social studies one of the competence areas is politics, and here the competence goal is that the student should be able to “take a stand on political issues, local and global, and give suggestions for actions” (UVM, 2019c, p. 8).

It was a feature of the accompanying material provided by the ministry for teachers that the goals of knowledge and skills should be interpreted by the teacher as concrete learning goals for the students. It is this feature of the reform that has perhaps been the most debated, partly because it can be seen as a movement away from the Didaktik tradition – if we interpret this as meaning a situation of broad freedom for the teacher to choose method and content in the teaching. In this light, this alteration is seen as a move towards a more centrally defined curriculum, and towards a situation where how the teacher is to work is decided centrally, using what was described as goal-oriented teaching (*læringsmålstyret undervisning*) (Skovmand, 2016; Rasmussen, 2015; Rasmussen and Rasch-Christensen, 2015). On the other hand, proponents of the reform goals argue (or could argue) that the goals in question are not more detailed in their content than in the curricula of 2009, and that the teacher still has the freedom to choose the adequate method in the teaching (Rasmussen, 2015; Rasmussen and Rasch-Christensen, 2015).

This example of a curriculum can be seen as an example of how the framework from the EQF has been used and transformed in the making of the curriculum of the Danish Folkeskole.

One of the questions I wished to address is how the concept of competence is expressed in the curriculum. Again, I will use social studies as a case. The subject is divided into four competence areas: politics, economics, social and cultural issues, and social scientific methods. Each has its own competence goal – for instance, the competence goal for politics is that “the student can take a stand on local and global political issues and give suggestions for actions” (UVM, 2019c, p. 8). For the other areas (except for the social scientific methods), the competence goal is expressed similarly: that the student can take a stand and give suggestions for actions or can act (in the case of social and cultural issues).

Compared with other subjects in the 2014 curriculum, there is no consensus on how the concept of competence is to be interpreted. For some subjects, the competence areas are more like areas of knowledge. For example,

the subject of religious education (*kristendomskundskab*) has four competence areas: the philosophy of life and ethics (*livsfilosofi og etik*), stories from the Bible (*bibelske fortællinger*), Christianity (*kristendom*), and non-Christian religions and other life-views (*ikke kristne religioner og andre livsopfattelser*). An example of a competence goal from the Christianity area is that “the student is able to interpret foundational values from biblical tales” (UVM, 2019b p. 8). Other subjects describe the competence areas by means of verbs rather than nouns, thus signalling a more active understanding of ‘competence’. For instance, the subject of history has competence areas such as the use of history (*historiebrug*) and work with sources (*kildearbejde*) (UVM, 2019a, p. 8). In the natural sciences subjects (biology, physics/chemistry, geography), a different approach has been taken, with four competence areas: investigation, modelling, communication, and perspective (putting into perspective). In this respect the natural sciences have implemented a common and more general concept of competences across the subjects (Daugbjerg and Negendahl, 2015).

These examples serve to underscore that there is no common understanding of the concept of competence in the Danish curriculum. Here, once again, is another example of the complexities involved in analysing the process of curriculum-making. Even if the Danish curriculum has been expressed in certain terms as a consequence of the implementation of a European framework – the EQF – the interpretations on the level of the subjects are distinct and depend on the actors around each respective subject. For instance, the natural sciences were able to choose a common framework for the competence areas, while social studies, history, and religion express very different understandings of what are regarded as competence areas.

Compared with the way the concept of competence is used in the German context of ‘politische Bildung’, it is clear that even when concepts are used internationally the use and interpretation vary depending on the local context. This is also in line with findings from Sweden by Nordin and Sundberg (Nordin and Sundberg, 2016).

Democracy and the international decision process

In the European Union, educational policy has been, and still is, the responsibility of the member states. On the other hand, there has been an interest in developing a common system and common standards. The EQF is an example of this. The so-called open method of coordination (OMC) is a way of making decisions that does not require the legal and institutional framework of directives. If the countries can agree on standards but leave it up to each state to decide on how they implement these standards, the entire legal framework is shaped within the purview of the member states. The decision-making process by which the member states together agree on the EQF but can then decide how to use the framework in local law-making is similar to the open method of coordination.

One question from the perspective of democracy is whether these processes are democratic, or in what sense they are democratic. The scholars Borrás and Radaelli have developed a framework for this analysis and suggest, following Weiler, the use of the term *demoi-cracy* to describe a form of democracy involving more than one people, or *demoi*. When working with a multinational cooperation such as the EU, it is not enough to talk about one *demoi*: it is necessary to work for a democracy of more *demoi*. Borrás and Radaelli use three normative models to discuss the legitimacy of the decision process, as shown in Table 5.1.

The models they use are liberal, communitarian, and deliberative, and they compare these with their own *demoi-cratic* criteria. In their view, the decision-making process (in this case the open method of coordination, OMC) can be evaluated from a democratic point of view using these criteria, which opens the possibility of a more complex understanding of European democracy – or *demoi-cracy*.

If we look at the process of the formulation of the Danish curriculum in this light, it seems that the parliamentary involvement is pronounced high. Even though the framework of the EQF is used, the interpretation is very much based on a national interpretation. On the other hand, this is exactly what was

Table 5.1 Normative principles of democracy and *demoi-cratic* criteria in OMC governance

<i>Principles</i>	<i>Link with democratic theories</i>	<i>Demoi-cratic criteria</i>
Parliamentary involvement	Liberal, communitarian, deliberative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation of national parliaments in OMC processes • Parliamentary control of OMC results (national parliaments)
Societal input	Liberal, communitarian, deliberative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal access and participation of interested stakeholders and civil society organisations at national level • OMC processes' responsiveness to societal demands • Possibility of public debate on the OMC processes overall and specific goals
Transparency and accountability	Liberal, deliberative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publicity of decision-making progress and results of OMC • Monitoring, reporting, and verification of OMC results
Deliberative quality	Deliberative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguing vs bargaining as interaction mode in OMC process • Substantial openness of deliberation in OMC processes • 'Democratisation' of expert input in OMC processes

Source: Reproduced from Borrás and Radaelli (2014, p. 135)

criticised in the process: that the government is taking too much power over the content of the curriculum. Regarding the societal input, while numerous actors were invited to participate in the process of formulating the curricula, the process in itself was on the other hand rather closed, as the members of the working groups were instructed not to discuss the results before the work was completed. In one case – the curriculum for the Danish language – a discussion ensued when some members of the expert group found that the ministry of education had changed their input. As for whether transparency and accountability were achieved, the curriculum of 2014 has been widely discussed, and the process that followed when changes were made can be interpreted either as an example of deliberative qualities or as political bargaining following a change in government. Thus, it is not possible to give a clear-cut evaluation of the democratic qualities of the process as such, just to give an example of the factors involved.

Conclusion

Is the decision-making process a top-down process in which national governments fall in line and follow directives from transnational actors? Or is it a complex form of democracy which can be described by the concept *demoi-cracy*? As I have shown in this chapter, the process is indeed complex and involves a number of actors. In Denmark, the development of the curriculum has been directly influenced by international decisions, in particular the EQF; but the effect of that influence and the way it has in itself been interpreted has also been influenced to a large extent by local actors. This can be seen in the differing uses of the concept of competence between the various school subjects.

In Germany, looking at the development of the curricula in civic education, it is clear that international developments have also played a part, but local interpretation has an important influence. The existence of an academic community, for instance, plays an important role.

The conclusion is that the development of curricula in a comparative view must be seen as a complex process involving different actors on different levels. This is sometimes described as “multi-level governance” (Chou et al., 2017). The impact of international actors such as the OECD and the EU is to a large extent dependent on local factors such as academic traditions and the existence of organised groups.

To sum up, concepts that on the surface appear to be uniform, such as competence, can end up having different meanings across countries and across school subjects within countries. This calls for an ongoing international research effort to shed light on how concepts travel and change across countries and traditions – as has also been pointed out by Nordin and Sundberg (Nordin and Sundberg, 2016).

This conclusion emphasises that research in comparative curriculum development can give a new perspective on the development of the curriculum. It

can also be used to enhance understanding of the issues at stake in the dialogue between the Didaktik and curriculum traditions.

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