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Exploring curriculum change using discursive institutionalism – a conceptual framework

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to explore to what extent and in what ways discourse institutionalism can contribute to the understanding and analysis of curriculum change in a globalized context. By focusing specifically on curriculum change, this article proposes how discourse institutionalism can contribute to the so-called ‘crisis of curriculum theory’ by addressing (i) the non-linearity of change, (ii) the process of the translation of ideas and (iii) actor agency. The text is structured in three sections. In the first section, we elaborate on the notion of curriculum change as a vital concept for the field of curriculum theory in a globalized context, focusing on processes of recontextualization and the translation of curriculum content. In the second, we elaborate on discourse institutionalism as a contributing approach to the analysis of such processes of curriculum change, constructing a conceptual framework. In the third and final section, we give some examples of how the conceptual framework can be used in analysing curriculum change, using the 2011 Swedish curriculum reform (Lgr 11) as an empirical reference, and the result shows that the conceptual framework offers a wide repertoire of possible approaches to analysing curriculum change, both vertically and horizontally.

KEYWORDS

Transnational education policy; policy transfer; curriculum change; discursive institutionalism; curriculum theory

Introduction

Over the past decades, curriculum theory (CT) has evolved into a multi-faceted field of research. A variety of theoretical and methodological approaches has contributed to a deepened understanding of a research phenomenon increasingly characterized by rapid change and uncertainties (Priestley, 2011). The traditional question in CT has been what knowledge is of most worth. As shown by Deng (2015), this is a multi-layered question, which contains an epistemological dimension, concerned with various ways of knowing, a normative dimension, which has to do with the purpose of schooling, and a practical dimension, having to do with curriculum making. Over a long period of time, questions relating to these dimensions were predominantly analysed from the perspective of different kinds of psychological approaches (Pinar, Reynolds, M., Slattery, & Taubaum, 1995), a period which might be described as the ‘psychological phase’ of CT.

However, during the 1960s, dissatisfaction grew among curriculum scholars concerned with the present state of the field. Schwab (1969) argued in a series of publications for a need to turn to ‘the practical’ linking theory and practise more closely together. In his practicals, Schwab developed philosophical principles for how to redefine, and make a case of, the craft tradition as central to the advancement of the field that had become to academically focused on theoretical issues of understanding...
curriculum loosing sight of its practical matters (Westbury, 2005). In reconceptualizing the working relationship between theory and practise in curriculum studies Schwab contributed significantly to the development of the field and its relevance outside academia (Connelly, 2013; Westbury, 2005). With his book  *Knowledge and Control*, published in 1971, Michael Young contributed to the methodological gaze of CT even further and paved the way for a new interpretative paradigm termed ‘a new sociology of education’ (Torres & Antikainen, 2003; Whitty, 2010). Entering into this ‘sociological phase of CT’ meant that the analytical focus was now redirected towards the selection and organization of ‘the official knowledge’ and how it affects cultural reproduction in different societal arenas. An important point of reference was to the classical works of Émile Durkheim and his distinctions between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ (1912/2001). However, drawing also on more contemporary social theorists such as Karl Mannheim, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, neo-Marxists and reconceptualists understood the question of what knowledge is of most worth as a political and ideological issue, where different societal forces struggle for dominance. Englund (2011) has described the latter part of this phase, with its new interest in the performativity of language, as a ‘linguistic turn in the field of CT’. The main task for CT now had to do with the deconstruction of educational practices, revealing powerful forces and actors acting out of selfish and often economic interests, creating and upholding unequal practices and, in the long run, an unequal society (cf. Apple, 1982; Pinar et al., 1995; Popkewitz, 1991; Young, 1971).

Due to the rise of a global learning discourse permeating education policy and curriculum making, emphasizing competencies, skills and learning outcomes in favour of knowledge content (cf. Deng, 2015; Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Sivesind & Wahlström, 2016; Sundberg & Wahlström, 2012), Young (2008, 2013) and Whellahan (2010) have argued that the field of curriculum theory once again has entered a state of crisis. When powerful policy actors such as the OECD and the EU have come to advocate a competence-based curriculum, focused on generic knowledge rather than disciplinary subject specific content (cf. Hopmann, 2008; Karseth & Sivesind, 2010), CT has not had a theory of knowledge able to contribute in any significant way, Young argues. However, following Lundgren (2015), we see the rhetoric of this second crisis as somewhat misleading, missing out serious attempts made in recent years to connect the field of CT, for example, to the continental *bildung* tradition facilitating theoretical and methodological approaches able to discuss different forms of knowledge, including knowledge content (cf. Deng, 2016; Hopmann & Riquarts, 2000). Uljens and Ylimaki (2015) have also contributed in expanding the gaze of CT, using discourse institutionalism (DI) to connect CT to the field of educational leadership and into a general non-affirmative theory of CT/didaktik grounded in continental philosophy.

However, whether the field of CT is in a state of crisis or not, there is a need to further widen the methodological repertoire, due to societal changes and new uncertainties (Priestley, 2011). However, the solution to what Young has identified as a second crisis in the field of CT, we argue, is to go back neither to a one-sided focus on powerful knowledge nor to a realist turn, letting go of all discursive aspects. Instead, these two aspects can be seen as intertwined, both needed to understand curriculum change in an uncertain and complex societal context. Losing sight of the substantive ideas making and remaking human institutions in communicative interaction means a loss of explanatory power and is just as problematic as a neglect of the actual subject content to be learned.

As pointed out by Young (2015), neo-institutionalism has so far been standing somewhat apart from the CT field, focusing on schooling rather than on curriculum. This article aims to contribute to such a research by bringing discourse institutionalism, as a new strand of neo-institutionalism, into the field of CT to explore to what extent and in what ways it can contribute to the understanding and analysis of curriculum change in a globalized context. By focusing specifically on curriculum change, this article proposes how DI can contribute to the so-called ‘crisis of CT’ by addressing (i) the non-linearity of change, (ii) the process of the translation of ideas and (iii) actor agency.

The text is structured in three sections. In the first section, we elaborate on the notion of curriculum change as a vital concept for the field of CT in a globalized context, focusing on processes of re-contextualization and the translation of curriculum content. In the second, we elaborate on DI as a contributing approach to the analysis of such processes of curriculum change,
constructing a conceptual framework. In the third and the final section, we give some examples of how the conceptual framework can be used in analysing curriculum change, using the 2011 Swedish curriculum reform (Lgr 11) as an empirical reference.

**Understanding curriculum change**

One of the major issues today in the field of CT has to do with curriculum change and the search for a better understanding of what drives curriculum change in today’s globalized society. What local, national, and/or transnational forces and actors play a role in shaping and reshaping national education systems, and what convergences and/or divergences can be identified (Anderson-Levitt, 2008)? Traditionally, the mode of curriculum comparisons has been set within a framework of quantitative descriptions of differences and/or similarities at a surface level. Here aspects such as subject categories, time allocation and resources have been central to the analysis. One prominent example of this is the Eurydice network within the EU’s Lifelong Learning Programme, which includes statistics for 2013 from 36 countries. The comparisons of Eurydice provide important system features, but they have little to say about why curriculum ideas and/or practices change over time. Although they have contributed widely to policy makers as well as academics in the field of CT at a surface level, we argue that these modernist curriculum analyses emanating out of a functionalistic rationale rest on dubious premises for a more profound analysis of curriculum change in a globalized society characterized by multiple and sometimes contradictory rationalities. Despite its prominent position among politicians, think tanks and mass media, this neo-positivist assumption of a linear causation between policy and practice, where the construction of policy and implementation determines the outcome, has also been radically undermined in contemporary curriculum studies.

As shown by Anderson-Levitt (2008), modernist approaches have been theoretically challenged by approaches such as world-system theories, post-structural theories and world culture theories, each trying to widen the theoretical and methodological gaze of modernist approaches emanating out of a functionalistic rationale backed up by human capital theory. Emanating out of a neo-institutional tradition, the world-culture approach has contributed to an awareness of power relations to explain educational change (cf. Meyer & Ramirez, 2012). In line with the logic of an increasingly globalized and conforming societal context, the world-culture theorists proposed an idea of a so-called ‘world-culture of schooling’, a global process creating the convergence of national educational systems, driven by powerful transnational actors such as the OECD, the World Bank and the EU. While contributing to the understanding of global processes affecting national education and to the creation of new transnational policy spaces, this approach was eventually criticized for ignoring the influence of national and local policy contexts (see Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). To understand educational change as part of national politics and to avoid a simplified and/or overestimated analysis of curriculum change, the analysis must include both an interest in the global processes driven by powerful transnational actors and the national and local contexts with their historical, cultural and political characteristics (Nordin & Sundberg, 2014). However, as shown by Simola, Rinne, Varjoa, and Kaukoa (2013), the field of comparative education still suffers from a methodological deficit and an under-theorisation when it comes to more complex and non-linear approaches to policy transfer. Despite this, there have been serious attempts in recent years to develop non-linear theoretical approaches within CT, that is to conceptually acknowledge that travelling polices and reforms have multiple and contested meanings. The linguistic turn in CT thus fundamentally undermine the functionalist premises on policy transfer and implementation as a one-way directed process. In the following section, we will present some of them, oriented towards different aspects of curriculum change.
Non-linear analytical approaches to curriculum change²

Priestley (2011) has followed up on the idea of a second crisis within the field of CT. Although somewhat sceptical of the concept of a crisis, he argues that curricula today are confronted with a whole range of new uncertainties. To analyse these new uncertainties and their relevance for curriculum change, he turns to critical realism, and especially Archer’s social realism, based on the idea of a so-called ‘in-depth ontology’ consisting of two dimensions, the first a compound conception of reality and the second an idea of a stratified society with successive layers emerging from those below. The key concepts here are ‘emergence’ and ‘social interaction’. Based on Gidden’s (1984) structural theory analysing social reproduction and/or transformation, Archer argues for an analytical dualism, which means a separation of the three aspects of ‘culture’, ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ which affect social interaction. Through decoupling these aspects, Archer argues for the possibility of talking about a ‘relative causality’, or put differently, she asks which of the above-mentioned aspects are most important in a given social situation. Linking this methodology to curriculum change offers a set of tools for analysing how policy inevitably mutates when traveling within educational systems. It also gives insights as to what has changed and, on a general level, what aspects have been identified as causally influential.

However, despite the fact that Priestley (2011) identifies social interaction as a central aspect, little attention is given to the character of this interaction and the question of why change occurs. The implications for CT are mainly directed towards the understanding of how policy mutates from policy makers to practitioners and the need for professionals to be part of the ‘emergence of policy’ at a local level. Still, little is said about the character of the socially interactive processes referred to, the actors involved or the different directions the interaction might take, leaving out central aspects if wanting to move beyond the linear rationale.

Wood and Butt (2014) provide another example of a non-linear approach to curriculum change. They draw on complexity theory and action research in developing an upper secondary education course in geography away from a content-heavy curriculum, where they argue that teachers are reduced to ‘deliverers’ of content. In their study, they emphasize the role of the teacher as a co-creator of curriculum and the need for such an approach in times where classrooms have increasingly become sites of complex and unpredictable social interaction. Innovative development cannot be fostered in reductionist and predefined ways, they argue. Thus, Wood and Butt (2014) provide important insights into the role of teachers as innovative co-producers of curriculum (what) and curriculum change at a classroom level (how). However, societal complexity is taken for granted, and little is said about its character or the role of teachers as agents at different policy levels.

Although not explicitly talking in terms of curriculum change, Uljens and Ylimaki (Uljens, 2016; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015) have recently made important contributions to the development of a general theory for curriculum change, using DI to link CT to the field of educational leadership. An understanding of educational leadership as a ‘multilevel’ project within and between different policy levels, all the way from teacher–student relations at a micro level to leadership exercised by actors such as the EU and the OECD at a supranational level, facilitates a coherent analysis linking leadership studies to schools as politically directed institutions. To strengthen such an analysis, Uljens and Ylimaki (2015) argue for a closer connection between leadership studies and CT to counteract the prevailing situation where practitioners often must combine a variety of disparate theories and expert recommendations, not infrequently from normative and instrumental starting points. Introducing a pedagogical vocabulary from continental philosophy, Uljens and Ylimaki argue for the need to facilitate communicative spaces at all policy levels. But they argue for a ‘non-affirmative’ position, unlike that of reproduction-oriented (socialization) theories and more radical-transformative (critical) theories, where what is valued is decided in advance, be it in the existing world or in a future ideal. This position emphasizes reciprocal communication within and between actors at different policy levels, acting out of a relative autonomy. At the same time, educational actors at all policy levels must acknowledge what has to be learned in order to participate in society and what new knowledge might emerge when learners learn
to make use of their own productive freedom. Instead of educational leadership being regarded as a matter of implementing ready-made ideas, it is here understood as an invitation to communicate, to interrupt and to have one’s own ideas interrupted: ‘In doing so, educational leadership as curriculum work recognizes the subject as radically free as this makes him or her able to transcend what is given’ (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2015, p. 39). In order to achieve this understanding of leadership in terms of curriculum work at different levels, Uljens and Ylimaki (2015) turn to discourse institutionalism. It is in the curriculum-making discourse that they see an invitation to self-activity and self-formation (and thus change) within and between different policy levels.

Likewise, Wahlström and Sundberg (2017) have founded an elaborate framework for empirically analysing, explaining and understanding education reforms in the interplay among the transnational, national and local levels. The framework incorporates discursive institutionalism into the field curriculum theory to challenge linear models and assumptions. It thus provides a more multifaceted set of concepts to the re-contextualization of education and curriculum policies in different arenas, which put communication in the forefront of analysis. While drawing on this framework, we are here focusing on the issue of curriculum change more exclusively from a curriculum theory perspective.

Although still in its promising embryonic phase, there is a growing interest in using DI not only to develop educational theory for curriculum change but also to understand and analyse curriculum change as processes of recontextualisation and translation (e.g. Nordin, 2014; Nordin & Sundberg, 2016; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017). In the following sections, we will further elaborate on the latter aspects in order to develop a conceptual framework enabling contextual comparisons over time and space, acknowledging endogenous as well as exogenous forces within and between different policy levels in making and remaking educational institutions.

**The contribution of discursive institutionalism**

Due to the globalization of the curriculum field (cf. Anderson-Levitt, 2008), issues of how to address, understand and explain the role of transnational forces and actors as drivers of change have become central to the field of curriculum studies (Nordin & Sundberg, 2014; Priestley, 2011). As a result of this ‘transnational turn’, scholars in the field of curriculum theory must update their analytical tools to be able to take on curriculum making as a complex, multi-layered practice taking place in a complex interplay among transnational and national as well as local arenas and a diversity of endogenous and exogenous forces and determinants. Here we see neo-institutional theory, and especially its latest branch, discourse institutionalism, as a vital contributor to facilitate such an analysis and, for the curriculum field, to widen its methodological repertoire.

**Neo-institutionalism in education**

Neo-institutionalism had its origin in the 1970s in a growing dissatisfaction among scholars at Stanford University, who noted that educational organizations did not conform to the traditional tenets of organizational theory. The links between the formal structures of schools and the teaching and learning which took place in classrooms were tenuous. The Stanford scholars argued that legitimacy instead of efficiency was the most important constraint. Shared beliefs rather than a logic emphasizing efficiency is what constitutes educational organizations, the Stanford group argued (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). Neo-institutionalism has since then evolved into different traditions such as ‘rational choice institutionalism’, ‘historical institutionalism’ and ‘sociological institutionalism’, emphasizing different aspects of how these shared beliefs work in order to construct and maintain human institutions (Schmidt, 2010). They have all contributed to deepening the understanding of how humans, through the use of language and other symbolic representations, actively construct meaning within different institutional settings (Meyer & Rowan, 2006). However, as
Schmidt (2010, 2011) points out, these theoretical strands have hitherto been better at explaining continuity than explaining change.

In examining the vast literature on neo-institutionalism and education, it is obvious that these perspectives have come to play a major role. Using concepts like ‘path dependency’ and ‘isomorphism’, the educational field has gained insight into how historical and global forces act as drivers of change, making the field diverge and/or converge in different ways (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016). Others have focused more specifically on comparative research on policy lending and borrowing, adopting a more differentiated analytical lens (cf. Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). Using concepts like ‘externalization’, this strand of research reveals the process of policy-making and the roles of educational actors as lenders and borrowers. However, we argue that important questions on the processes of curriculum construction, such as power relations and policy translation, still remain unanswered. Other theoretical strands such as ‘discourse analysis’ and ‘network analysis’ have so far paid little attention to institutions as drivers of curriculum change; instead, focus has been placed on socio-political-economic forces and interests and how they are formatted into powerful networks. Although the illumination of silent agreements in powerful networks provides a fruitful analysis of curriculum change and convergence, the content process of institutionalization tends to disappear (e.g. Rhodes, 2006).

Despite their respective merits, each of the aforementioned approaches is unsatisfying in some respect when it comes to exploring curriculum change. That is, they provide valuable knowledge on specific ‘drivers’ of change but do not conceptualize these drivers’ interconnectedness and how concepts are being translated and reconfigured while moulded in the interplay of these drivers.

**DI and a new focus on institutional change**

In order to capture the dynamic interplay of curriculum policy-making taking place within and between different policy arenas, different drivers of change must be taken into consideration. Using only state-centred modernist approaches to schooling is as unsatisfactory as applying discursive perspectives, which reduce every issue to a matter of asymmetric power relations. Here we see the work of Vivien Schmidt (2008, 2010, 2011, 2016)) as a fruitful contribution to the conceptual repertoire of curriculum theory. Using the concept of discourse institutionalism, Schmidt seeks to call attention to approaches theorizing both the substantive content of ideas and discourse and how they contribute to maintaining and/or altering institutions. The main critique of the ‘older’ neo-institutionalisms is that they have not paid enough attention to ideas and discourse and therefore have been unable to explain institutional change. Institutions have been positioned in a state of stable equilibrium, as historically self-reinforcing, path-dependent institutions, populated by rational actors, Schmidt argues. By contrast, DI takes a more dynamic view of change.

Discursive institutionalism, by contrast, takes a more dynamic view of change (and continuity) by concentrating on the substantive ideas developed and conveyed by ‘sentient’ agents in discursive interaction that inform their policy-oriented actions which in turn serve to alter (or maintain) ‘institutions’. (Schmidt, 2011, p. 107)

Here the term ‘discourse’ is used in a more generic way, encompassing both the substantive content of ideas and the interactive process where these ideas are conveyed. Put differently, discourse includes not only text (what is said) but also context (when, where, how and why it was said) and agency (who said what to whom). Schmidt points to the subordination of agency to structure as a major problem amongst the older strands of neo-institutionalism. DI, however, treats institutions as simultaneously ‘given’ (the contexts in which people act, think and speak) and ‘contingent’ (the results of people’s thought and actions) (Schmidt, 2008). DI adopts a dialectic approach to institutions, acknowledging aspects of both institutional construction and constraints, which exceed the logic of ‘rule-following’ permeating the older strands of neo-institutionalism, making it more applicable for the analyses of institutional change. As pointed out by Uljens and Ylimaki (2015, p. 39), ‘Discourse-oriented curriculum theory provides a language for talking about the human interactive and interpersonal dimensions of...
any level, from classroom to transnational’. It facilitates an analysis able to bring together incremental approaches to policy change, focusing on endogenous factors as drivers of curriculum change, with more crisis-driven approaches, and focusing on the role of exogenous events as drivers of curriculum change and reconfiguration. This is not to say that curriculum change can be explained solely in terms of ideas and discourse, since things can happen for many reasons. However, when things happen, actors develop ideas about them, ideas which are communicated as parts of explanations of change, whether incremental or crisis-driven (cf. Schmidt, 2011).

A conceptual framework

In this section, we present five analytical aspects, which constitute the conceptual framework developed in this article; these are ideas, arenas, actors, language and legitimation. As a response to Schmidt’s urge to take ideas seriously, they are put at the forefront in the framework below. First, understanding curriculum change must start with the identification of significant ideas operating within or between one or more policy arenas. Searching for ideational expression in different arenas means that this analytical step operates at a vertical level. The next step includes the identification of actors, their discursive construction of policy problems and the way they legitimize specific solutions. These analytical concepts operate on a more horizontal level, although the distinction between the two levels is made for analytical reasons rather than to try to capture a multifaceted and multidirectional reality. The point here is that in order to understand the ways in which educational institutions are altered (or maintained) in a globalized world, the interplay between ideas operating at different levels must be taken into consideration.

Ideas (what?)

In defining ideas as the substantive content of discourse, Schmidt (2008) distinguishes between three types of ideas due to their level of generality and fixity. These are policy ideas, programmatic ideas and philosophical ideas. Policy ideas refer to rapidly changing ideas at a surface level, defined issues operating when ‘windows of opportunity’ (Kingdon, 1984) open. Here exogenous crises as well as endogenous processes of ideational construction and events can operate as ‘window openers’. Analytical focus is here directed towards the policy problem, the legacies it challenges and the institutional capacity and capacity of the actors involved (Schmidt, 2011). These rapidly changing policy ideas are also often part of a more general set of programmatic ideas. These ideas are more general in character and act as frames of reference. However, although some frames of reference prevail at a given time, most of the time, there are several sets of ‘référentials’ (Jobert, 1989) simultaneously struggling for dominance (cf. Apple, 1982; Young, 1971). Programmatic ideas are also themselves constructed out of different and sometimes contradictory ideational elements. Therefore, putting policy ideas into practice in more coherent programs often means processes of negotiation and translation, especially when policy travels within and/or between different institutional contexts (Nordin & Sundberg, 2014).

Programmatic ideas are more stable than policy ideas but are less stable than the third type, philosophical ideas. Unlike programmatic ideas, where expert knowledge plays an important role, this type of ideas refers to shared values, moral principles and symbols developed over a long period of time within the political, public and/or academic spheres.

Arenas (where?)

As rightly pointed out, the field of curriculum studies has become increasingly characterized by globalization and internationalization (cf. Anderson-Levitt, 2008; Autio, 2014; Pinar, 2008). National, regional and local arenas have become increasingly intertwined with each other and with different global arenas. This also means an increase in boundary-crossing processes, where discourse has
become central to the analysis (Schriewer, 2012). Due to this new level of complexity, we argue for a multi-level analysis where ideas must be discussed in relation to different arenas, transnational and national as well as local. The assumption here is that ideas change both within and among these arenas. There are important questions to be asked when it comes to how educational ideas, for example ‘competencies’ or ‘standards’, travel and are re-contextualized from ideational and research arenas, international policy arenas (in the nexus of economy-education), formal arenas (administration and management), general public arenas (culture, media and politics) and professional arenas.

**Actors (who?)**

Focusing on different policy arenas also implies focusing on different actors acting within as well as between these arenas. Transnational organizations such as the OECD, the EU, the World Bank and different kinds of lobby organizations and NGOs, must also be taken into consideration when analysing education at a national and/or local level. Actors in national and local arenas can include governments, trade unions, teachers, students and parents, just to mention a few. The point is that different actors must be taken into consideration to avoid oversimplified conclusions based solely on transnational organizations or national governments as drivers of curriculum change. In the case of curriculum change, there are also important links between different actors forming powerful discourse coalitions, affecting the ways in which professionals, teacher unions, proponents of specific reforms, education authorities, politicians, consultants and experts think and act.

**Language (how?)**

A differentiated concept of ideas opens up for analysis the ways in which different languages are used to alter and/or maintain educational institutions. The language use says something about what kinds of ideas are present, and thus something about policy pace as well. In line with the three levels of ideas proposed by DI, we distinguish between a ‘slow language’, often emphasized within historical institutionalism and based in tradition, ideology and/or academic knowledge, and a ‘pragmatic language’, close to the daily work of politicians trying to find a way among opposing positions. And finally, we identify what Lundahl and Waldow (2009) have described as a ‘quick language’, a language which can change rapidly, not infrequently encompassed by different kinds of statistical data.

**Legitimation (why?)**

Regardless of policy arenas, DI also distinguishes between **cognitive** and **normative** ideas. Cognitive ideas provide the recipes and shared maps for political action, while normative ideas attach values to political action (Schmidt, 2008). Put differently, cognitive ideas serve to legitimate a common ground for action and normative ideas to legitimize a certain course of action. Here ideas are closely connected to discourse and to the question of why ideas are expressed the way they are in discursive interaction. DI also distinguishes between a **coordinative** and a **communicative** discourse. Coordinative discourse refers to interactive processes among policy actors, such as transnational actors, government officials, consultants, experts and union leaders, actors involved in the discursive formation of cognitive ideas and the content of discourses. Put differently, coordinative discourse strives towards cognitive justification with, as a result, a discursive coordination around a specific content emerging out of a communicative interaction between different actors and interests.
Communicative discourse is directed towards the public sphere and the formation of mass public opinions. In addition to politicians, policy makers, spin doctors and party members, this discourse also involves different media channels, opinion makers, social movements and ordinary people who can play an important role in the formation of public opinions, not least through the use of social media. In communicative discourse, the cognitive ideas developed among policy elites are communicated to the public sphere, striving for normative justification.

In real life, the coordinative and the communicative spheres are of course intertwined in many different ways and cannot easily be separated from each other. The division (Figure 1) is a simplification made for analytical reasons, to highlight aspects of discursive interactions of importance, in order to understand curriculum change.

This general conceptual framework is developed to enable complex analyses of curriculum change. Focusing on educational ideas travelling within and between different policy levels, the way different actors engage in policy-making processes, the language they use and the justification claims which are made altogether facilitates an analysis which simultaneously recognizes agency and institutional framing, discourse and materiality. The conceptual framework thus offers a wide repertoire of possible approaches to analysing curriculum change, both vertically and horizontally. However, it is a general framework and therefore necessarily a reduction of an even more complex and multifaceted reality. The framework is by no mean exhaustive and has to be adjusted in relation to what is to be studied, especially so regarding the analytical aspect ‘actors’ where we

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ideas (What?)</th>
<th>Arenas (Where?)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy ideas</strong></td>
<td>Transnational National Local</td>
<td>Politicians, local school authorities, media, school leaders and teachers</td>
<td>Quick language</td>
<td>Coordinative discourse/cognitive justification Communicative discourse/normative justification</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Programmatic ideas</strong></td>
<td>Transnational National Local</td>
<td>Politicians, policy-makers, educational experts and school authorities</td>
<td>Pragmatic language</td>
<td>Coordinative discourse/cognitive justification Communicative discourse/normative justification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophical ideas</strong></td>
<td>Transnational National Local</td>
<td>The public, politicians and academics</td>
<td>Historical language Ideological language Theoretical language</td>
<td>Coordinative discourse/cognitive justification Communicative discourse/normative justification</td>
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Figure 1. Conceptual framework for analysing curriculum change within and between different policy arenas.
have only given some examples of whom might be involved at the different levels, others could have been taken into account.

Since the main contribution of this article is conceptual rather than empirical, the exemplification below is limited to a brief analysis of some of the more fundamental ideas underpinning the latest Swedish curriculum reform in 2011 and the way these ideas are acted out at different ideational levels.

Curriculum change through the lens of discursive institutionalism: empirical exemplification

In this section, we will empirically exemplify the outlined conceptual framework for analysing curriculum change. The focus will be limited to processes of re-contextualization and translation of educational ideas between the transnational and national levels in relation to the Swedish reform, Curriculum Standards for Compulsory School (CSCS), which was introduced in 2011. Of special concern here will be analytical issues concerning how transnational educational ideas travel and are framed and re-contextualized into national curriculum policy and institutional practices. Kelly suggests that:

Ideas never stand alone. They come woven in a web of auxiliary ideas, consequential notions, supporting concepts, foundational assumptions, side effects, and logical consequences and a cascade of subsequent possibilities. Ideas fly in flocks. To hold one idea in mind means to hold a cloud of them. (Kelly, 2010, pp. 44–45)

A basic assumption in our analysis is that the construction of the curriculum involves discourses, which traverse a wide range of texts and sites, from the legislative and policy documents formulated by officials, through curriculum texts prepared by experts, teacher representatives and researchers to lessons in the classroom and informal conversations between teachers and students. Dominant curriculum discourses tend to represent the social formations and power relations of their historical, cultural and political contexts and transcend simple, clear-cut distinctions between macro-, meso- and micro-levels of curriculum making. Professional practitioners play a major role in selecting and framing elements from such discourses in their textual and discursive practices.

The Swedish curriculum reform of 2011

The latest Swedish curriculum reform is part of a package of reforms and changes introduced with the aim of strengthening national governance and reorienting schools towards a clear focus on knowledge, according to the Swedish Ministry of Education (Government Bill 2008/09:87). It has its origins in a national debate on ‘the school crisis’ due to student achievements in the PISA evaluations in the early years of this century (Nordin, 2014). In public discourse on the systemic flaws of the Swedish school system, there was wide support for and consensus about the necessity for new reforms. But interestingly, at the same time, there was an emphasis on continuity with the former national curriculum (Lpo 94). Thus, the curriculum reform of 2011 highlighted issues of legitimacy and justifications both for drawing on established traditions and background understandings among stakeholders, professionals and the public and also for adapting to exogenous policy pressures from transnational arenas.

The Swedish curriculum reform of 2011 is an illustrative case of transnational policy transfer. Previous empirical research analyses (see Wahlström & Sundberg, 2017) have demonstrated that there were several convergences as well as divergences between transnational education policy trends and the construction of the Swedish curriculum standards reform. For example, among the most salient and significant convergences the focus on prescribed curriculum standards and basic skills (literacy, numeracy and communication) by the state are obvious. They are legitimated through a discourse on equity, which is a fundamental idea permeating the entire public sector
in the social democratically run Swedish welfare state. This idea suggests the same curriculum for all students, irrespective of their individual preconditions, meaning that they all have an equal right to reach the standards and, in that respect, promote the democratic function of schooling. A second convergence is the academic rationalism and scientification of content standards in the curriculum. By referencing an evidence-based knowledge conception, the subject content is given within the frames of the academic essentialist traditions. The most salient divergences due to transnational policy trends in the Swedish case are that the discourse regarding cross-curricular or generic competences (promoted, for example by the OECD) as well as key competences are subordinated to subject-specific skills (Nordin & Sundberg, 2016). So how can we understand and explain these national convergences and divergences? What analytical and methodological possibilities open up by employing the framework of discursive institutionalism to investigate curriculum change? Let us briefly point to some possibilities, using the Swedish curriculum reform as an illustrative empirical example.

**Philosophical ideas and curriculum ideologies in the CSCS reform**

The examination of the re-contextualization process in the national policy arena shows that the Lgr 11 reform involves changing conceptions of education and was part of a major ideological shift in Swedish education policymaking. Whereas the curriculum discourse of the former national curriculum from 1994, Lpo 94, was centred on knowledge conceptions, which included the schools’ wider civic and cultivation mission (e.g. Official report, 1992, p. 94), the conception of the pre-investigation for the Lgr 11 reform (e.g. Official report, 2007, p. 28) was centred on qualification and the effectiveness of the education system. Using the typology of curriculum ideologies, there was a clear displacement from a humanist (emphasizing personal development, creativity and self-actualization) and, in some respects, social reconstructionist perspective (emphasizing sociocultural and political aspects of the curriculum) in Lpo 94 towards an academic rationalism (emphasizing the importance of the transmission of subject knowledge) and social efficiency (emphasizing skills and competencies for social and economic productivity) in Lgr11. The analysis thus concludes that the curriculum reform of Lgr 11 involved fundamental changes in the underlying ideas and assumptions (philosophical ideas), which can partly be explained by the dominant transnational curriculum policy discourses on standards and standardization which frame curriculum issues in specific ways. The changes involve a displacement of power when it comes to actors’ influences over the public education discourses. Drawing on the framings and definitions of international organizations, such as the EU and OECD, there have also been ideological displacements over time.

Generally, standards are considered measurable products and uniform outcomes, attained through parsed processes of linear production. This ‘modern’ understanding of schooling as a ‘deliverance’ of services renders curriculum knowledge and content a standardizable and marketable object. It facilitates the coordination of actors in curriculum making, as curriculum issues are framed in technical ways of organizing common programmes of study, age-based grade levels, uniform performance outcomes and efficient instruction. Reforms could be legitimized by using quick language on the technical and administrative aspects of the production, organization and distribution of knowledge. Such a decontextualized and depoliticized understanding of education legitimizes strong coordinative discourses, as normative issues remain implicit. Professional agency becomes restricted to coordinate and applying the curriculum, rather than do develop a local curriculum.

**Programmatic ideas in the CSCS reform**

In several aspects, in its programmatic features, the Swedish version of a standards-based curriculum follows the transnational policy trend on standards. It (1) focuses on uniform and specified standards and knowledge requirements in the curriculum to obtain measurable results, achievements and performance indicators. The construction also tries to achieve (2) a strong alignment and tightening
of the different elements of the curriculum chain: the selection of content, organization and assessment. This means that standards are clearly aligned to grading criteria. (3) Through specified levels of requirements, a summative assessment for evaluating and measuring learning outcomes has been made possible and strengthened. The curriculum has also (4) been introduced by means of films, subject-specific recommendations and general recommendations on teaching to meet the knowledge requirements (NAE, 2011b) as well as national guidelines for how to teach and assess according to the new standards.

Thus, while the philosophical ideas in the CSCS reform have been vague and, to a large extent, implicit, the programmatic ideas have been more explicit. The different curriculum stakeholders – politicians, educational experts and school authorities – have formed strong discourse coalitions in justifying a more coherent, systematic, uniform and standardized curriculum. The normative justification thus concerned how a fragmented, vague, fuzzy and decoupled curriculum needed to be replaced by systemic coordination and standardization. The normative justification of such a reform was also made by an extensive externalization, referencing the PISA results in Finland when proposing a new reform to meet the ‘school crisis in Sweden’ (Landahl & Lundahl, 2017). By using pragmatic language, the implementation of the CSCS reform concentrated on making a decoupled curriculum into a tightly coupled one. The policy makers stressed the importance of a strong alignment and tightening of the different elements of the curriculum chain – the selection of content, organization and assessment – as well as the steering chain from the state to the local authorities and schools in order to secure an equivalent assessment for all students. The national agency for education thus became a central policy coordinator in this process of standardization on a national level and the role of the professionals to coordinate and aligning on a local level.

**Policy ideas in the CSCS reform**

Understanding curriculum change with reference to the Swedish case of the CSCS reform also must be related to the third level of policy ideas and solutions, which have been adapted. The investigation of policy ideas in the Swedish curriculum reform has followed the analytical steps of content analysis: (i), identifying the main reform proposals used in the texts by means of a close and systematic reading, (ii) comparing the discursive constructions of the categories inherent in the text (i.e. semiotic legitimization) and (iii) analysing the shifts in the discursive justification of the reform categories in the two Swedish curricula, Lpo 94 and Lgr 11.

As an illustrative result of the analyses, one such policy idea was that used by the right-wing coalition introducing and presenting the new curriculum reform in 2009 as a mere modification of the previous curriculum, Lpo 94, as the ‘policy window’ for major curriculum reform was limited at the time. The coalition’s referring to some ‘technical adjustments’ in the programmatic curriculum meant that fundamental differences in the curriculum’s philosophical underpinning and construction, with a strong focus on standards and knowledge requirements, were not objects of cognitive or normative justification in public discourses. Instead, the Lgr 11 reform was launched as an adjustment of Lpo 94 and as a policy solution to the problems created by Lpo 94, meaning that it required no historical, ideological or theoretical language for its justification.

According to the curriculum makers, the general part of the curriculum and the underlying view (or philosophy) of knowledge were the same as before. However, the result of the analysis of the curriculum text with respect to the focus of the two curricula on knowledge (‘which knowledge is of most value?’) clearly points to major inherent and underlying philosophical and ideological shifts in the curriculum discourse formation. The results demonstrate a gradual relocation and reconfiguration of the discourse into the pedagogic re-contextualizing field, which also involves how teachers’ professional curriculum work, their teaching repertoires and their assessment practices are reframed and reconfigured. By introducing and relying on educational measurements and comparative statistics, the quick language of PISA also entered the local discourses of curriculum making. The international large-scale assessments were used not only as descriptors of educational achievements within limited knowledge sectors but as defining education and schooling as a
whole. The policy solutions proposed mostly by national policy actors were decoupled from an ideological language or a theoretical language for their justification. Thus, the different political parties as well as the general education debate were centred on the results of the large-scale assessments, and the debate was framed by the agenda set by politicians and the media, with the background view of the Swedish school as a school in crisis. In many cases, the policy solutions successively also became solutions for educational and curriculum problems in the public and professional discourses.

Concluding remarks

Finally, we end with some conclusions on the possibility of addressing ‘the second crisis of curriculum theory’ and how to address the issue of curriculum change in a time of political and social transformations. In this article, we have highlighted the particular contribution to curriculum theory of discursive institutionalism, especially concerning the interplay between transnational and national arenas for curriculum making and the interplay between endogenous and exogenous forces in curriculum change. By so doing, we have started unpacking the assumptions of linearity, state-centeredness and deliverance as the prevailing premises of educational reforms. Assumptions were also reframed, from decoupling and loose coupling to the relative independence of decision-making in national policy-making. By analysing discursive forces and practices with respect to different contexts, arenas, actors etc., new avenues for understanding and explaining curriculum change emerged.

For curriculum theory to overcome the current state of crisis and occupy a critical role in curriculum making, the dynamic interplay between different arenas and actors needs to be scrutinized. As suggested by Steiner-Khamsi (2012), instead of assuming global-local connections in a linear way, comparative curriculum research needs to develop contextual comparisons with specific case studies, which allow for theoretical generalizations across nations. By reference to the DI framework on the curriculum, local actors and professionals are not passive or mindless adopters of global ideas. Instead, we have argued for an interplay between exogenous crisis and endogenous path-depending traditions. Actors and stakeholders play a crucial role in re-contextualizing and translating policy imperatives to institutional practices and rules. Thus, the decision making of leaders (political, professional, administrative etc.) cannot be properly explained, we argue, without taking into account the role of institutional settings, spaces, times and interactions under which the actors use their capacities and agency, sometimes by ‘ceremonial’ conformist responses to transnational policy imperatives and sometimes by substantially recoupling elements of transnational policies to national and local frames, regulations and norms.

Here the concept of translation is fruitful in understanding how national and local actors imitate and reproduce ideas and practices. According to Sahlin-Andersson (1996), actors are motivated to make changes to solve problems, which are constructed by the comparisons of other changes judged as successful. However, policy ideas and solutions are always discursively framed in specific ways by their programmatic as well philosophical and ideological features, as in the Swedish example demonstrated in this article. Curriculum issues thus far relate solely to technical matters for administrators to solve. However, by introducing the concepts of coordinative and communicative discourses, curriculum change is reframed as a matter of public and professional deliberation.

In times of the globalization of educational ideas and reforms, the critical scrutiny of power structures and relations shows that they are far from static or stable. Rather, as stressed by Bernstein (2000), they are contested and negotiated in the relations of pedagogic communication. Thus, in order to overcome what Michael Young has described as the crisis of contemporary curriculum theory, new perspectives on the symbolic control of the ‘who’ (different categories of agents), the ‘where’ (temporal and spatial relations) and the ‘what’ (the language and discourses) need to be addressed and explored. This article is an attempt to contribute to such work.
Notes

1. For an in-depth reading on Schwab’s theoretical contribution and its relevance for educational reforms we recommend the edited volume by Westbury and Wilkof, *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education* published in 1978 at The University of Chicago Press Books.
2. This is not an exhaustive list but rather, gives some recent examples of non-linear approaches of relevance for this study, oriented towards curriculum change or discursive institutionalism.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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