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Talk, decisions, and action in curriculum-making: reflections on the *ILS* and *L97* case studies

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ABSTRACT

Previous papers in this issue of *JCS* have presented case studies of the state-based curriculum commissions that developed the *Illinois Learning Standards* of 1997 and Norway's *Læreplanverket 1997 (L97)* (1997). The studies were developed using as a framework a body of German research that sees state-based curriculum-making as a tool for managing the interface between school systems and states' publics and politics. The principal question for this cross-case analysis is the portability of the German framework to the *ILS* and *L97* cases. There many features of the two cases that do mirror the characteristics of Germany's state-based curriculum-making, which leaves the questions 'How, when and why was this transnational model of state-based curriculum-making invented?'

KEYWORDS

Governance; *Illinois Learning Standards*; *Læreplanverket 1997* (Norway); national curriculum; state-based curriculum-making

In the earlier papers in this issue of *JCS* reporting on the Organizing Curriculum Change (OCC) project, a 7-jurisdiction study of state-based curriculum-making,¹ we suggested that the state's curriculum-making should be seen as an instrument for managing the interface between states' school systems and the societal and political environments of the systems. In the earlier papers in this issue of *JCS*, we set out the grounds for this claim and reported two case studies of state-based curriculum-making: the development of the *Illinois Learning Standards (ILS)* in the US state of Illinois in 1997 (Westbury 2016) and Norway's *Læreplanverket 1997 (L97)* (Sivesind & Westbury, 2016b), also from 1997. In this paper, I bring the findings of the two case studies together.

First, let me summarize the background to the case studies and the starting points of the OCC study. Doyle (1992; see also Sivesind & Westbury, 2016a) points to the existence of curricular discussion and debate in:

- (1) a *public and political context*, that is a public/media/party-political/political discourse and debate on education, schooling and the curriculum²;
- (2) a *school system*, that is, in the school and professional programmatic context wherein curriculum frameworks offer rationales for the work of the school; provide a language and forms for describing and steering the structures of schools, programmes and courses, and sometimes approaches to teaching; provide criteria for successful graduation from/completion of a school programme, etc.

- (3) a *classroom context* wherein curriculum policy and prescriptions are given form in actual classrooms and lessons by working teachers, etc.

These nested contexts are invariably loosely coupled, although it is important to note that there are points at which a resolution of a debate at one or another 'level' has direct implications for another level.³

Thus, in Switzerland, in the mid-1980s and early-1990s, after many years of discussion and debate, a national referendum and a federal court decisions ordained gender equality. This decision in turn opened questions for Switzerland's school systems in terms of course access, course availability and school types that seemed to require decisions and action at the *programmatic* level. As one consequence in 1984, the canton of Zurich initiated a curriculum commission to consider gender issues in the compulsory school system along with a general modernization of the curriculum. The commission concluded its work in 1981 with the formal adoption by the Cantonal Council for Education of a comprehensive new curriculum, *Lehrplan für die Volksschule des Kantons Zürich*, the first global change in the cantonal compulsory school curriculum since 1911.

In the post-war years' expansion of opportunities in higher education, university scientists' and mathematicians' calls for a realignment of pre-university school curricula with curricula in the then-canonical university STEM disciplines required, in its turn, programmatic revisions within the school system. As a result, the US federal government supported the development of 'modern' curricula (packaged as textbooks) in physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics for local and state adoption. In addition, US high school mathematics sequences of courses were reorganized to add sequences culminating in pre-calculus, and later calculus, courses. Such 'reforms' may have, or more often may not have, a significant impact on a school system's classroom curricula but they have a significant impact on political and public perceptions of the school system, and the legitimacy of the school and its programmes. The legitimacy of programmes and curriculum has been an underexplored topic in Anglo-American curriculum research.

Legitimacy and the curriculum

Brunsson's (1989) *The Organization of Hypocrisy* explores the general case of how organizations, such as school systems, generate legitimacy in environments in which norms are inconsistent:

Many organization cannot or do not want to avoid inconsistent norms; instead *they become experts at generating support, resources and legitimacy from environments exhibiting just such inconsistency*.... And many [such organizations] are also expected to produce organized action. Thus is some way they must reflect inconsistencies and produce action. (p. 9, emphasis added)

This is, of course, the situation of public education!

In Brunsson's account, organizations that are expert at operating in such environments exploit the differences between 'talk', 'decision' and 'action' to manage their fields and the issues they must respond to.

Instead of seeking niches ... and satisfying one need or interest at a time, the political organization reflects a variety of ideas and demands and satisfies the expectations of diverse groups in its environment ... [It] is multi-ideological; it includes lots of ideas about the nature of the organization, and about what the organization should do. (pp. 19, 21)

Such organizations manage the inevitable potential for conflict produced by its multi-ideological constituencies using a variety of strategies, but one in particular stands out: they *differentiate* talk, decisions and action—by time, topics, organizational units and environments (Brunsson, 1989, pp. 34–38).

The state-based curriculum-making commissions that were the focus of the OCC study constitutes a tool-kit or instrument that is available to states' managers of school systems to maintain or enhance the legitimacy of their states' systems in their multi-ideological environments. In the earlier papers in this series, we contended that, because of its utility in this regard, the instrument of state-based curriculum-making has come to adopted (or re-adopted) by many states that (1) have had no tradition of state-based curriculum-making, e.g. the UK and the US, and (2) by central governments in federal states in which education is a new area of central government policy-making and action, e.g. Australia, Germany, Switzerland. And, in recent years, curriculum commissions have been used with increasingly frequently, and indeed have been converted into more or less permanent bodies, in states with long traditions of state-based curriculum-making, e.g. Canada's provinces, Norway, Sweden.

Haft and Hopmann (1990) and Hopmann (1988) developed this link between state-based curriculum-making and the legitimacy of school systems as a result of their studies of school reform in 19th and early 20th-century Germany (Prussia). There, as they see it, the Prussian state administrations' initial genuine interest in global school reform gradually shifted in the face of a public and professional resistance to change. And with this shift, curriculum reform and the tool of the curriculum commission emerged as instruments of the governance of the system, as essentially symbolic, 'talk' and 'decisions'—without explicit implications for necessary consequent action. But at the same time such talk and decision, that is the creation of a curriculum commission—as a basis for further talk(?)—was (and is) a tool for the ideological legitimation and re-legitimation of the schools in the face of secular changes in the social understandings of schooling/education. In this way, curriculum commissions and 'curriculum reform' became the instruments—to use Lundgren's (2003) terms—for the *ideological* governance of the system,⁴ for the steering of public understanding of what schools do (curriculum), and why?

Although Haft and Hopmann's (1990) and Hopmann's (1988) account of Prussian school reform was embedded in their studies of Germany's history, they hypothesized that 'curriculum reform' and the curriculum commission would be pervasive, instruments for the governance of state-based school systems.

The question is ... whether [the curriculum commission and its tools] ... should be regarded as locally developed characteristics of the Prussian administration, or as much more common tools of symbolic action that may suit almost every case of curriculum administration above the classroom level. Haft and Hopmann (1990, p. 164)

One purpose of the OCC study was to explore the hypothesis that the state-based curriculum commission with a core of common characteristics would be found cross-nationally. To begin testing this hypothesis, the case study of the *ILS* commission becomes very significant. Illinois is far from Haft and Hopmann's 19th and early 20th-century Prussia and can illuminate the place of the curriculum commission in school systems far from the cultural worlds of northern Europe.

Curriculum reform and curriculum commissions

The OCC study focused on what is often the precursor to ‘curriculum reform’, the *curriculum commission*, a tool within the tool-kit of state educational administrations that straddles the domains of decision and action, and often (usefully) muddies the distinctions between these different activities. Commissions are government, that is, politically appointed; but, like the analogous royal or presidential commissions, they are seen as apolitical and expert, concerned with the educational rather than a political good (see Prasser, 1994). Curriculum commissions seek to legitimate their recommendations for decision by process and by a careful framing of their terms of reference. Thus, to avoid major controversy around their work as it might interact with a structure of school types, school financing, provision of special education, assessment, etc., the terms of reference of the commission are invariably *compartmentalized*, i.e. such issues are not within the scope of the commission. But such compartmentalization also limits the scope of the outcomes of a commission’s work, such that, as Haft and Hopmann (1990) note, that work is more often than not symbolic or, as Lundgren (2003) sees it, ideological. As John Dewey (2001) noted, curriculum-makers may have a monopoly over talk about the school, but it is ‘administrators’ who control actual schools.

The *ILS* and *L97* curriculum commissions

To what extent were the characteristics of German curriculum commissions, as identified by Haft and Hopmann (1990) and Hopmann (1988), seen in the contemporary US *ILS* and Norwegian *L97* commissions?

Both the *ILS* and *L97* commissions came about because of government, that is, party decisions about educational policy. (In the case of the *ILS* commission, the fundamental decisions about the work of the commission were made by a different level of government, i.e. by the federal government.) The starting point of both commissions was a decision to change the trajectory of conventional assumptions about the curriculum. In Illinois, the new state curricula were to be ‘standards’ rather than outlines of ‘content coverage’ and these standards were to be linked to a testing framework. In Norway, the government’s platform saw the schools moving their work towards competence- and human-resource development—and ultimately forms of national assessment—with an explicit prescription of a national content to be covered and a rejection of the school-based developmental model that had long been national policy. Both jurisdiction’s public administrations were heavily involved in the work, and the curriculum writing, of the commissions.⁵

But at the same time, the commissions involved large numbers of people from each system’s communities of school practice: in the case of the *L97* commission, 131 of the 181 members (72%) came from school, intermediate agencies, regional colleges and public and educational interest groups. In the case of the *ILS* commission, 220 of the 274 members (80%) came from outside the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), the state’s education agency (see Figure 1). *The teachers and university, college and school personnel and most of the ‘others’ from professional communities of practice, e.g. artists and musicians, represented their learning and subject areas. They saw their tasks within the commission as primarily professional, concerned with best educational practice rather than ‘politics’, party, or policy.*

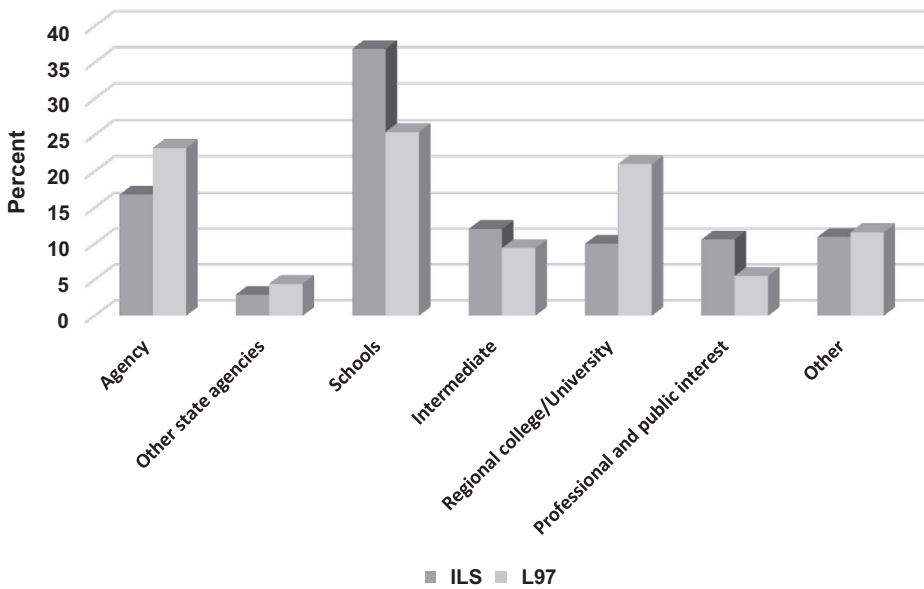


Figure 1. Professional backgrounds of members of the *L97* and *ILS* commissions (%).

Notes: The occupational roles of members of the *ILS* and *L97* commissions were classified as follows: (1) 'Agency': ISBE or KUF professional staff and consultants; (2) 'Other state': representatives of other state agencies; (3) 'School': school-level teachers and administrators; (4) 'Intermediate': intermediate agency (i.e. LEA- and/or county- level) supervisors and administrators; (5) 'Regional college/University': regional college and university administrators and faculty; (6) 'Public and professional': representatives of educational, public interest groups; (7) 'Business': representatives of business firms; and (8) 'Other': other.

In each case, such self-identification was facilitated by forms of structural differentiation that (1) separated such policy issues as vocational education, testing, examinations and certification, school financing and staffing from the work of the commission, i.e. *compartmentalization*; and (2) an internal architecture that divided the commission into small working groups with a common focus and community of reference, i.e. *segmentation*. Haft and Hopmann (1990) suggest that it is in these forms of differentiation that we see the most characteristic common working tools of state-based curriculum-makers.

Compartmentalization and segmentation were wielded in very similar ways in each of the commissions. Thus, in the 'talk' around both commissions, the issues were framed in terms of the language of 'systemic reform' with a particular focus on standards, certification and assessment. However, *within* each commission, talk about systemic reform and its toolkit were explicitly and implicitly taken off the table by both KUF and ISBE.⁶ As a result, the 'actions' of the large teams of curriculum-writers were focused on the development of 'standards' (Illinois) or subject syllabi (Norway), with little regard for the issues of policy that might impact the ostensible larger goals of the project.

Furthermore, in both commissions, the work was segmented, such that, within task groups, the members tended to share more or less common professional backgrounds and there was comparatively little interaction between the major project groups. Thus, in each commission, the curriculum-writing groups had members from ISBE/KUF but, as we have noted, the overwhelming majority were school- or intermediate-level subject leaders augmented by subject-based teacher education faculty members from universities and/or regional colleges (*ILS*, 65%; *L97*, 71%, see Figure 2).

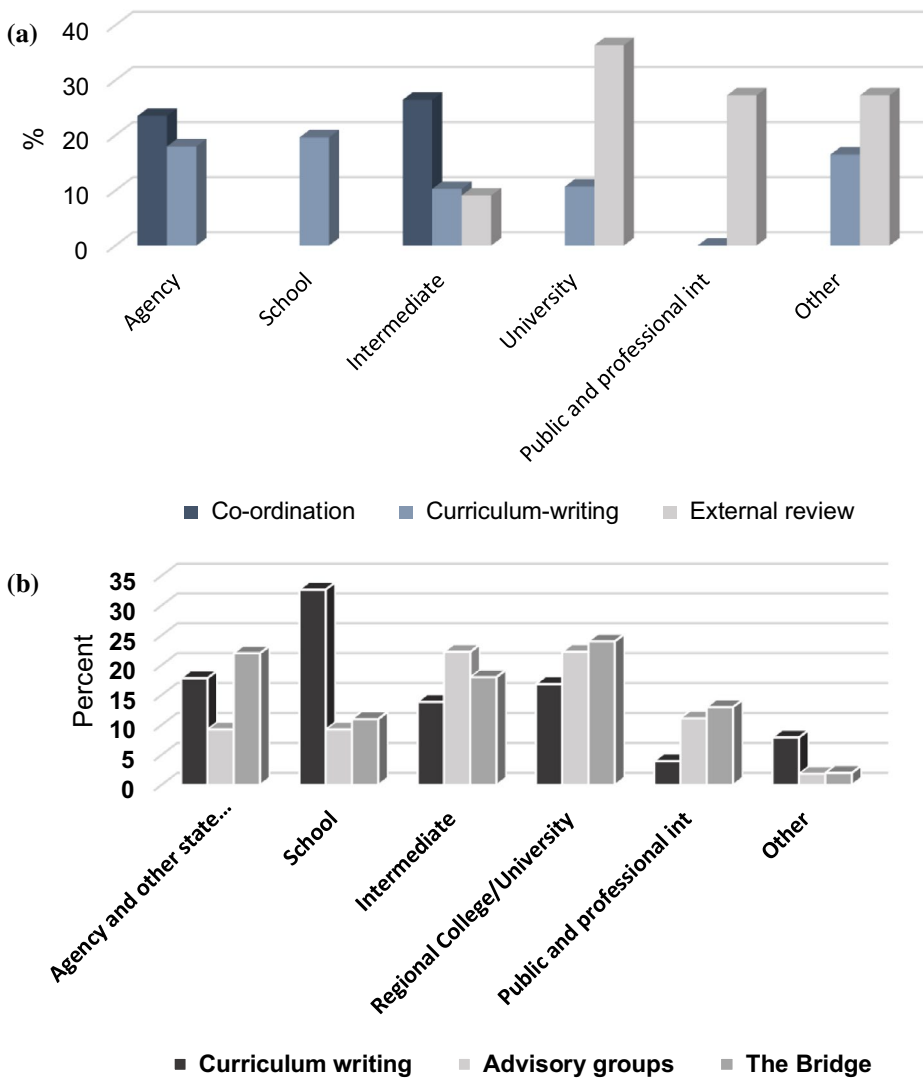


Figure 2. Segmentation of members within the commission (%) (for the categories on the horizontal axis, see Figure 1). (a) The ILS commission. (b) The L97 commission.

The other task-groups within the commissions were very different in composition: in Illinois, a *Co-ordination Team* discussed policy issues around the commission’s work and a *Superintendent’s External Review Team* managed the public and professional feedback on the draft version of the ILS and offered its own advice to the project’s management team and the state superintendent (director) of education. Teachers and principals did not serve on the Co-ordination or External Review Teams. The Co-ordination team was made up largely of intermediate-level administrators and ISBE personnel. The External Review team was made up of representatives of universities, of public and professional interest groups, and ‘others’ (including representatives of the state governor, etc.).

The curriculum-writing task force of the L97 commission was supported by several additional advisory groups and was complemented by the committee on the so-called *Bridge*, concerned with time allocations to subjects, teaching methods, etc. In Norway, teachers,

representatives of the county agencies responsible for schools, and subject-based regional college and university representatives dominated the curriculum-writing groups (71% of the membership) but, in contrast to the *ILS* commission, teachers were also scattered across the other task groups. However, in the advisory groups and the committee on *The Bridge*, they were in a minority⁷ in groups dominated by representatives of regional colleges and universities and public and professional interest groups.

Licensing

As was noted in earlier papers in this series, Haft and Hopmann's (1990) tool of *licensing* had its origins in the principle of *Lehrfreiheit*, 'freedom of instruction', German teachers must cover the content embedded within the state curriculum, the *Lehrplan*, but have the freedom to teach it in any way that seems appropriate to their situation. As Haft and Hopmann (1990) noted, this principle limits the impact of the idea of curriculum as a 'conduit' for curriculum planners' intentions by acknowledging the active and necessary agency of teachers as 'implementers'.

But while Haft and Hopmann's recognition of the teachers' role in implementation of curricula emerged in and from a specific legal and cultural context, the implications of the principle of *Lehrfreiheit* has echoes in other contexts. In Illinois, for example, curricula and standards have long been the prerogative of LEAs, *not* ISBE. The *ILS* did not change this situation—although the state-prescribed tests that emerged alongside the *ILS* were to change the dynamics around curricula in LEAs' schools' and teachers' practices.

Norway's *L97* tells a somewhat different story. *L97* was declared to be binding: 'Municipalities and school administrators and staff are individually and collectively responsible for seeing that the education is in accordance with the curriculum' (Koritzinsky, 2002, p. 213). However, in conformity to long-standing Norwegian practice, many of the *L97* syllabus committees had built a prerogative of school- or teacher-level interpretation into many of the subject-area syllabi. And, as Helgøy (2006) contends, Norwegian education policy during the 1990s followed traditional reform trajectories with divisions between different authorities and powers.⁸ The school system did not dramatically change during the 1990s.

It is important to note that Haft and Hopmann's (1990) identification of licensing as part of the tool-kit of the state's curriculum-making is *not* a claim about the implementation or otherwise, or the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of a curriculum. Haft and Hopmann (1990) invite a search for the functionality of curriculum-making in a context of the licensing that is built into the process of the state's curriculum-making. They conclude their search for functionality by noting that (1) the acceptance of the principle of *Lehrfreiheit* allows the state's curriculum-makers to blame problems, or even failure, on teachers and (2) by proposing—with Lundgren (2003)—that the state curriculum is largely symbolic. It is a tool available to the state for managing the school–society interface: the curriculum provides an ideological foundation for *public* narratives describing what schooling, what it is for, and how it is changing. *L97* and the *ILS* would seem to provide ample support for their supposition.

Four studies of state-based curriculum-making

In Germany, in the 1960s, education and schooling become a major public concern summarized by the slogan '*deutsche Bildungskatastrophe*', the 'German education catastrophe'. As part of the academic, professional response to this movement Robinsohn (1967) and other

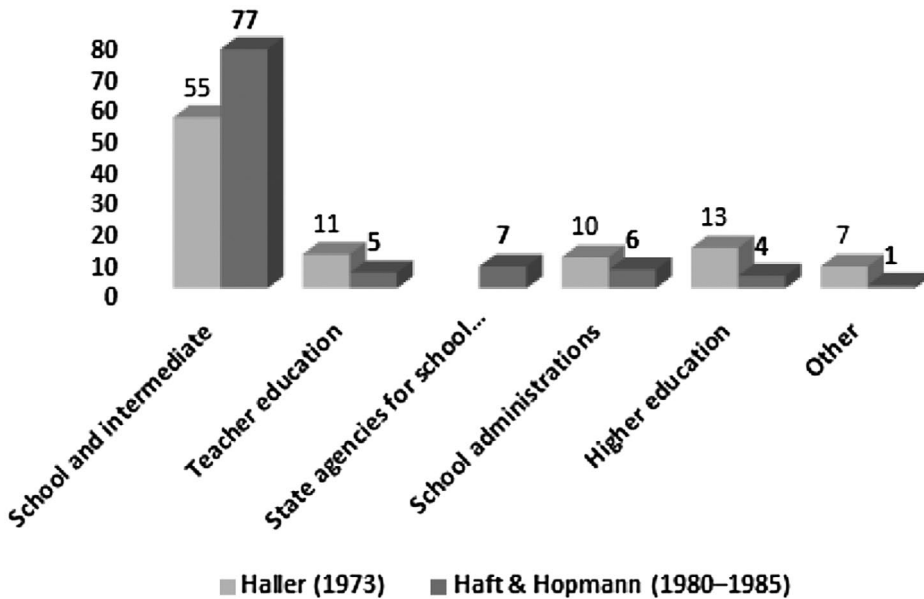


Figure 3. Composition of German curriculum commissions, 1973–1985.

modernizing German curriculum-thinkers introduced forms of thinking we now associate with ‘human resource development’ to argue for the modernization of how the German states’ curriculum commissions did their work. The commissions were, of course, the gatekeepers of any ‘new’, ‘scientific’ curricula. To achieve such goals, they argued for a broadening of the membership of commissions away from ‘traditionalist’, conservative teachers towards others, e.g. subject-matter and educational researchers, public interest groups, etc.

The short-term results of such agitation were seen in the findings from Haller’s (1973) survey of Germany curriculum-makers in the early 1970s ($n = 493$): 55% of the members of state curriculum commissions were teachers, 11% were from teachers colleges, 13% were from higher education, 10% came from school administrations and 7% were ‘other’ (see Figure 3). In other words, 66% of the members of the commissions were (still) coming from the schools or institutions close to the school.

Ten or so years later (between 1980 and 1985), Haft et al. (Haft et al., 1986; $n = 625$) undertook a set of parallel surveys of state curriculum commissions that showed a significant change in the composition of commissions: 77% of the commission members were teachers; 7% were from the state curriculum agencies (*Landesinstitute*); 6% were from school administrations; 5% were from teachers colleges; 4% were from higher education institutions; and 1% were ‘other’ (see Figure 3). Eighty-nine per cent of the members surveyed were from the schools or institutions close to the school.

Haft et al. (1986) and Haft and Hopmann (1990) saw the differences between their findings and those of Haller as an indication of a regression in the late-1970s and early-1980s in the composition of curriculum commissions to the patterns of the pre-‘reform’ era. They interpreted that regression as a marker of the greater functionality for Germany’s state educational administrations of the traditional commission vis-à-vis the reformed model. The curriculum administrations of the *Länder* did not need curriculum commissions to develop ‘modern’, ‘scientific’ and research-based curriculum plans for schools; they did not need trials to

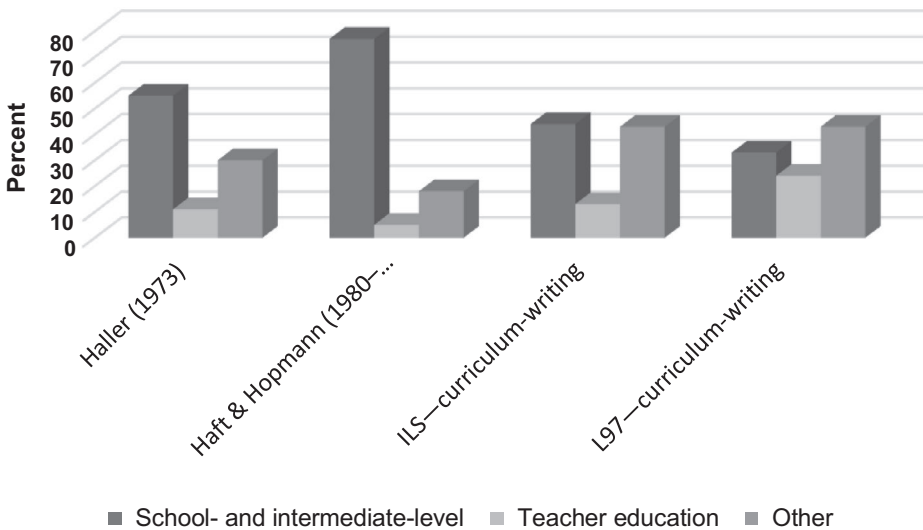


Figure 4. The composition of four curriculum commissions.

establish 'effectiveness'; rather, they needed workable and legitimate narratives indicating the responsiveness of schools to social and political demands, narratives that were, or so it seemed, endorsed by the communities of practice within and around the school system. *For their purposes within schools and their communities, the traditional model served better than the 'modernizing' model.*

All of which raises questions about the work of the *ILS* and *L97* commissions. But, first, how does their composition compare to the make-up of the German commissions? There are problems of matching institutions over cultures and a 20-year time-span in which, e.g. European teacher education moved from teachers colleges to higher education and enrolments in secondary and higher education increased substantially. The traditions of German public administration, corporativism, professionalism and the relationships between 'private' and 'public' schools differ from, e.g. US democratic republicanism and the US unwillingness to regulate private schools and systems. And *if* the curriculum commission as a tool-kit with a similar functionality for public administrations was the result of invention in many places, one might expect different places to give their commissions very different forms.

Nevertheless, there are obvious similarities across the cases: the curriculum-writing work of all the commissions is dominated by the communities of practice within the school system—teachers, LEA/county supervisors, subject-area teacher educators. In the German commissions of the 1970s and 1980s, teachers were very clearly dominant: we have seen that in Haller's (1973) survey across several *Länder*, 55% of the commissions' members were teachers;⁹ Haft et al. (1986) reported 77% of their commissions' members to be teachers. In the case of the *L97* commission, 33% of the members of the writing groups came from the schools; in the case of the *ILS* commission, 44% of the curriculum-writers came from the schools. However, when LEA-/county-level personnel are added, 47% of the *L97* commission's members and 54% of the *ILS* commission's members came from the communities within or close to the school. Ten or so per cent of the *ILS* curriculum-writers were teacher educators in universities, while 17% of the *L97* commission's curriculum-writers were teacher education

Table 1. Composition of curriculum commissions' syllabus-writing teams (%).

Work	Haller (1973) (n = 493) (%)	Haft et al. (1986) (n = 625) (%)	L97 (%)	ILS (%)
Communities of practice	66	89	64	66
Schools and LEAs	55	77	47	54
Teacher education	11	5	17	12
State-based curriculum development agencies	–	7	–	–
Other	20	5	33	46
Higher education/university	13	4	7	11
Other	7	1	8	17
Agency	–	–	18	18

faculty from regional colleges. In other words, 64/66% of the *ILS* and the *L97* commissions' curriculum-writers came from and represented their subject-area communities of practice (Figure 4 and Table 1).

At the same time, however, the *L97* and *ILS* commissions were more open to their larger communities than were the German commissions. Seventeen per cent of the members of the *ILS* commission's curriculum-writing groups were 'other', representing largely arts communities, although business representatives, e.g. banking, were also included. Likewise, 8% of the *L97* curriculum-writers were 'other', again largely representatives of the arts communities. Haller's commissions had 7% of their members labelled 'other'; Haft's commissions contained 1% of members representing 'other'. There were very few representatives of 'educational research', the STEM disciplines, cognitive science or 'advanced' curriculum development in either the *L97* or the *ILS* commissions.¹⁰

In other words, there would seem to be a real similarity in the composition of the writing groups (and the patterns of segmentation of the groups) across these German, Norwegian and US commissions, separated as they are by a span of 20+ years, and the boundaries of national, political and educational cultures. The *ILS* commission is, of course, particularly telling, in that the US does not derive its patterns of governance of public, or educational administration, from the northern European frame. *The OCC study's assumption that the curriculum commission would seem to represent a transcultural/transnational form/tool-kit in its compartmentalization and segmentation and its dependence on one or another form of licensing seems plausible.* When and how this transnational tool-kit emerged, and why, remain open questions.

However, the commission does seem to fill a 'need' in the ecology of public education. As we have noted, Haft and Hopmann (1990; see also Connelly & Connelly, 2010, 2013) see the commission as an instrument by which educational administrations/ministries can manage the interface between the public and the school, between 'political' and 'party' interests and educational and school system interests. It is a tool by which 'talk' can, as necessary, be channelled in order to bring about a 'decision'—to consider later 'decisions' about the 'talk' of political and educational elites (Brunsson, 1989). A commission's outcome is a 'decision' to present the society and school system with a reframed narrative about the work of teachers and schools—one that the communities of practice within and around the schools can accept. Needless to say, what happens to that narrative in the actions of the schools is another story (see Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Spillane et al., 2009).

A subsequent series of papers, to be published in *JCS*, will consider the surveys of the curriculum-writers undertaken in the countries included in the OCC study: Finland, Germany (two federal states), Norway, Switzerland (two cantons) and the USA (one state). In both the

Norwegian and the Illinois cases considered here, the members of the curriculum-writing task forces were required by the mandate and by the managers of the commissions to redirect their focus away from a traditional educational progressivism—towards, in the Illinois, ‘standards’ and, in Norway, a national rather than a ‘local’ curriculum that specified content to be covered. Needless to say, there was discontent among the curriculum-writers about this redirection. The second set of papers will be to examining the responses of the curriculum-writers, representing the professional communities of practice in the seven jurisdictions, to a range of mandates from their political authorities.

Notes

1. Finland, Germany (two federal states), Norway, Switzerland (two *Kantone*); USA (Illinois).
2. For a wonderful example see the recent English debate on the use of the exclamation mark by primary school children; see Schilling (2016).
3. See Spillane, Gomez, and Mesler (2009) for a discussion of this loose coupling.
4. Lundgren (2003, pp. 103, 104) identifies four sets of instruments that are theoretically available for the governance of school systems: economic instruments, i.e. resources; legal instruments, i.e. laws and regulations; evaluative instruments; and ideological instruments. Each set interacts with the other sets. Using a narrower framework, Cohen and Spillane (1991) identify five instruments that can be managed in order to govern or control instruction: (a) instructional frameworks; (b) instructional materials; (c) assessment of student performance; (d) oversight of instruction; and (e) requirements for teacher education and licensure. Again, each of these sets of instruments poses such institutional problems for a reforming leadership that potential deployment of the assemblage of instruments poses huge, and often insurmountable problems.
5. In Norway’s case, there was a close involvement by the minister of education himself.
6. ISBE, the Illinois State Board of Education, the State’s Department of Education; KUF, Kirke-, utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, i.e. the Royal Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs.
7. Teachers made up only 11% of the membership of the committee on *The Bridge*.
8. As Helgøy (2006) noted, any school reform is invariably mediated through geographic and institutional distance as well as the boundaries that separate centres from peripheries, all of which contribute to the maintenance of the rationales and logics already established within local practices.
9. Teacher education contributed 11% of the membership of the commissions Haller (1973) surveyed.
10. The most obvious difference between the German and the *ILS* and *L97* commissions was the presence of ‘agency’, i.e. ISBE and KUF, personnel as curriculum-writers: *L97*, 18%; *ILS*, 18%. It is not clear if the sampling frames in the Haller and Haft et al. surveys included the *Landesinstitute* personnel who directed the development of state syllabi: no *Landesinstitute* personnel were reported in the Haller survey; 7% of the respondents to the Haft et al. surveys were coded as ‘Landesinsitute’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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