How do Curricula Work? Models, Strategies, and Contradictions

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What, why, and who should be taught is a constant, relentless concern, and curricula are constantly being discussed and proposed as answers to these questions. For as long as there have been state-regulated curricula, i.e., for around 200 years, there have been complaints about them: they are old-fashioned or hypermodern, overloaded or incomplete, demand too much or offer too little, and are not specific enough or far too restrictive (cf. Hopmann 1988). Curricula are constantly being revised, and yet they are never finished: either they have recently been renewed, or they are currently being reviewed and are due to be renewed soon. Moreover, curricula are only part of a complex variety of planning tasks: from curriculum development, teacher training, and textbook production to annual, weekly, and individual lesson planning at the school level. Curriculum questions have to be asked and answered again and again.

From an international perspective, there is criticism of the regulation of teaching almost everywhere. In addition to countries with a long-standing curriculum tradition, some countries, for example, have no generally binding written curricula, at least in some areas of the public school system. However, functionally equivalent governance regimes of the public school system exist even there. Even in such contexts, the determination of lesson content is not simply left to the individual teachers or schools. Frameworks, specifications, result controls, or other requirements restrict the curriculum work.

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Various Forms of Curriculum Work

There are different forms of how the curriculum work is organized in the school system. It is, therefore, impossible to talk about the effects of curricula or other requirements independently of the organization of curriculum work as a whole. What creates leeway in one system can have the opposite effect in another. Broadly speaking, four basic modes of curriculum administration can be distinguished in Western countries:

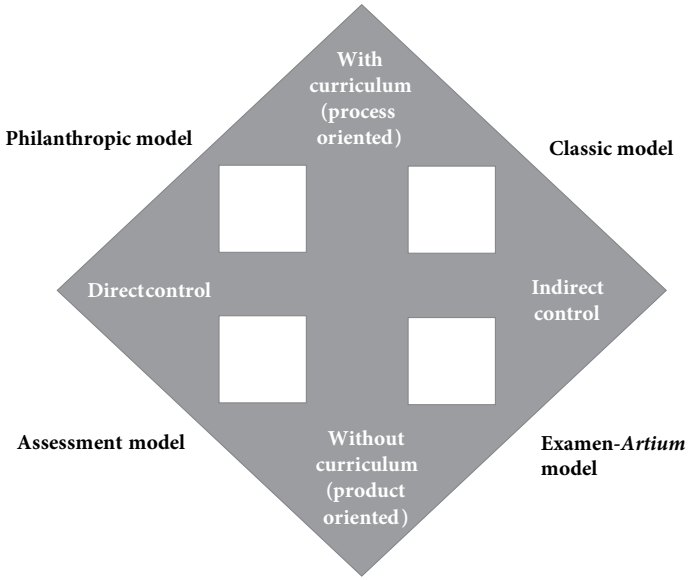
- The *philanthropic model* presents one of the oldest forms of state curriculum work and is based on a kind of dual strategy: on the one hand, the state (or its school authority) is granted the right to prescribe any teaching concept that is seen to be correct. This happens, for example, through curricula, school regulations, etc., in a binding manner. On the other hand, it is the task of the state (or the school authority) to provide information on teaching content and methods. In the language of implementation research, this would be a top-down model in which initiative and responsibility are seen as lying mainly with the curriculum administration, i.e., the state and its school authorities. Since the philanthropic first use at scale around 1800 (for example, in the former duchies of Schleswig and Holstein), this model has long been popular, especially in northern European countries (such as Sweden and Norway). It has often been used in conjunction with social democratic reform strategies.
- The *classic model* also sees the state (and its school authorities) as having overall responsibility for the content of lessons, but it limits intervention to the specification of a "material" framework (curriculum, guidelines). It leaves the overall responsibility for implementation to the individual school and/or individual teacher. The classic form builds on systematic differentiation between curriculum and lesson planning, which gives the teacher a kind of license to implement the curriculum specifications with pedagogical or methodological freedom. First codified in Prussia around 1810/20, the classical model represents the predominant basic pattern of curriculum work in the German-speaking countries until at least around 1970.
- The *Examen Artium model* (East Coast model) can be described as the foundation of school development on the East Coast of the United States.

There was no binding state curriculum and no other form of state specification of teaching content. However, associated with this model are effective access controls of higher educational institutions. For example, the admissions standards of the leading colleges provided high schools with relatively precise guidelines for them to work toward if their graduates were to have a chance (cf. Kliebard 1986).

- The assessment model (West Coast model) could also be illustrated using the history of schools in the United States, in particular using some West Coast states such as California. Here, too, there is no binding written curriculum. However, schools are given relatively precise guidelines as to what they should have achieved by particular measurement dates. At these times, standardized school performance tests are often conducted. In many US states, as well as in England and Wales, for example, the publication of results lists shows how much pressure is put on schools that perform poorly in this "school competition." Other, less rigid forms of the assessment model can be found in countries that prescribe standardized intermediate or final examinations (such as a centralized Abitur).

These basic forms serve indeed only as prototypes. In reality, there are usually mixed forms. In addition, as in Switzerland, Norway, or Denmark, different models can be applied for different school levels. The presence or absence of a curriculum and the degree of control used to monitor schooling are depicted in the figure below.

There are also commonalities across the models. For example, models with a curriculum generally focus on the process of instruction, while models without a curriculum focus on the results of it. Both models of direct control are more precise in their specifications and the definition of leeway than the models drawing on indirect control. In the latter, the limits of leeway usually only become apparent in conflicts of individual cases. Moreover, when looking at the consequences of the four types for working with the different kinds of guidelines, there must be a differentiation between the level of mediation (implementation) and the level of application, at the school level.



Prototypes of curriculum work

Leeway in Curriculum Mediation

Historically, the work of curriculum administration in Germany was seen as accomplished as soon as the curriculum was ratified. According to the classic model, it was up to the teachers and schools themselves to translate the curriculum content into local practice. From this context, Didaktik gradually developed as the decisive mode of processing. For didacticisms, from Willmann to Klafki, the curriculum should be seen as a content-related framework, but only "Didaktik analysis" can result in the actual design of the lesson. The distinction between predetermined educational *matters* and educational *meaning* to be developed didactically enables a wide range of possibilities of interpretation on teaching and learning. In systems without curriculum specifications, this specific form of reflection on teaching by the teacher has hardly been able to gain a foothold (cf. Hopmann & Riquarts, 1995)

Historically, an entire system of mediating activities and institutions has increasingly emerged in the space between lesson planning and teaching. Its most striking expression in Germany is, for example, the state institutes that

emerged in all federal states in the last quarter of the 20th century, which have developed a wide range of activities from teacher training to the development of teaching recommendations and teaching models. The guidelines generated by these educational institutions are often not automatically binding for schools and teachers but are assumed to indicate standards for didactic implementation. Consequently, in Germany, the area covered by the state curriculum administration has expanded considerably, and curriculum work has gradually shifted to philanthropic reform strategies, from its originally classic model.

In the classic model tradition, on the other hand, leeway in teaching practice arose far more from the fact that the curricula almost always catalogued more possible content than actually could be covered in an average lesson. This gave schools and teachers opportunities for variation through choice. Moreover, the side effect of this content overload was that new curricula, with a revised emphasis in their overall subject catalogue, could not exclude all teaching practices that had become common up to that point. Consequently, curriculum revision did not result in any immediate pressure to change (as was the case with philanthropic models due to their mandatory core teacher must follow). It is, therefore, not surprising that many teachers in Classic model systems do not even read the current curriculum regularly (Vollstädt et al., 1995).

In the Exam-Artium model and the assessment model, i.e., systems without curricula, the task of teaching becomes a different character. It is not about implementing or utilizing a given content framework in various ways. Rather, this assumed framework must first be described, and its teaching implications recorded. For example, based on the expectations set out in standards or tests, it is necessary to determine how a lesson must be organized in terms of content and methodology. This is in order to take the expectations into account. The most prominent expression of this form of curriculum work is the large curriculum projects developed in the United States (such as the Benchmarks for Science Literacy of 1994). However, unlike teaching plans, they are not binding for schools and teachers, but rather an offer of how the expected teaching outcomes can be achieved in classrooms, by detailed choice of subject and related teaching method. Consequently, there is room for manoeuvre. In many cases, textbooks or test batteries take the place of curricula in both normative and factual terms. As a result, a significant part

of the curriculum work is left to the "free play of forces," for example, the textbook marketplace (cf. Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

If, on the other hand, "curricular complete packages" are transferred to traditional classic model systems, as was the case in West Germany in the 1970s, they restrict the freedom of teachers, which was previously guaranteed by the didactic division of labor described earlier. The attempt to introduce—at university departments—scientifically prepared overall curricular solutions failed in the federal state of Hesse, for example, not only because this reform politically overstretched the legitimizing power of the curriculum administration. It also, in practice, alienated the teachers, as they lost the freedom of design, they were familiar with from the classical tradition. This led (especially in Hesse) to a withdrawal of all core curriculum development tasks back into the realm of education administration. Moreover, external stakeholders, such as universities, were essentially reduced to restricted tasks in curriculum work, such as the development of textbooks and teaching materials. What is remarkable, however, is that the leeway for the remaining parties involved in school and teaching apparently increased as a result of the return of curriculum development to education administrative bodies at least if this shift was accompanied by a new division of didactic labor, either in the classical model sense, cataloguing of content, with approval of implementation, or in the philanthropic sense, by restricting it to core areas.

School Organization and Lesson Planning

The critical question is how the different control modes affect the school level and the teachers. A common basic trend can be identified everywhere: The teaching sector has expanded almost explosively in terms of institutions and personnel. Every curriculum reform and every other type of innovation is followed by a myriad of support activities and materials that not only intend to make the work on-site easier but also can make it more complicated. The decisive factor for lesson planning is how leeway and commitment are balanced in curriculum work. This is where the four models (and their various hybrid forms) differ.

In the classic model, this balance rests on the division of labor between teaching and lesson planning, as defined by the restriction of curricula to

subject matter and freedom of method. Here, an overload of content does not necessarily mean restriction of leeway if profile development is made possible through selection and prioritization. It also depends on the competence of the teachers to utilize the difference between educational matter and meaning to shape the profile of their lessons. Many school innovations and movements, such as reform pedagogy (*Reformpädagogik*), have made use of this division of labor: Their reform proposals, usually defined as teaching methods (project learning, student-led lessons, etc.), are compatible with different curricula. Of course, they jeopardize this division of labor precisely to the extent that their proposals are included in curricula and thus restrict the freedom of methods at the other end (cf. Hopmann, 1996).

In philanthropic systems, the balance is made possible by the self-restriction of education administration authorities. Its material and methodological guidelines only regulate certain sections of the lessons. Profile building is made possible by filling in the non-regulated part. On the other hand, the balance is jeopardized in two ways: first, by the fact that self-regulation is not successful. Second, there is a risk of hierarchization in this division of labor if the possible leeway is not systematically expanded at the school level. That means if the non-regulated parts of instruction are left to the random will of individual teachers and are not related to the compulsory part of the curriculum, pupils (and their parents) would naturally focus their attention on the "compulsory" parts. The "optional" parts would only become a learning opportunity for the few pupils who are not yet fully occupied by the compulsory part.

In the Examen Artium model, the leeway of schools and teachers is, in principle, the most extended. No one formally forces or pressurizes them to teach specific subjects. They can choose from a variety of ready-made curricula or develop their own. In reality, however, a completely different pressure arises from the interests of pupils (or their parents) to be qualified for certain further stages of education or life. The legitimization of teaching without a curriculum is permanently precarious as well. The extent to which this context restricts the leeway of teachers and individual schools depends on the local balance of power between them and their social environment. In community-controlled school systems such as the Danish primary school system, where parents have a decisive say in curriculum decisions, this can impose constant obligations on teachers to justify their decisions. They can

often only avoid this by voluntarily adopting the Ministry of Education's formally non-binding curriculum recommendations.

Assessment models directly affect schools if the standard testing results become publicly accessible (and this is absolutely unavoidable in open societies) or—as in parts of the United States—have an impact on the allocation of resources. A hierarchy of "good" and "bad" schools emerges in the "common sense." However, success and failure only become visible in relation to what can be measured. This does not exclude other achievements or teaching profiles. How much space remains for schools and teachers depends on how "problematic" the ranking tables become and how much indirect hierarchization of different teaching performances and content they enforce.

What does this all mean for leeway in lesson planning? It relates to the respective "mix of strategies" on which the curriculum work draws. Moreover, it indeed depends on how well teachers know how to utilize the freedom given to them. Individual means (curricula, textbooks, and further training) can neither guarantee nor prevent good teaching on their own. Not for educational reasons, but for political and administrative reasons, curriculum work constantly moves between the poles outlined here. However, the effects of a strategy shift in curriculum work on teaching should not be overestimated. So far, none of these models described so tightly determines teacher practice that good ideas can fail because of the control and framing alone.

Still, there is a danger when dysfunctional elements are combined: classic curricular leeway disappears if it is surrounded by outcome controls; curricular choice becomes a farce if, in addition to indirect outcome controls, a curriculum sets narrow limits for the course and method, etc. The most far-reaching leeway restriction results from a mixture of procedure-oriented and outcome-oriented curriculum work. It would almost inevitably marginalize all teaching and school life dimensions, which are neither prescribed nor measured. This danger is inherent in expanding the standardised examination requirements, which can already be studied in many international contexts.

Of course, a fifth strategy could be devised: that of a radical abandoning of state regulation combined with the greatest possible leeway of organization for each individual school. Even if one disregards the unavoidable inequality in the school system depending on the supporting school community, it is

doubtful that this strategy could be sustained in the long term. Why should society, represented by politics and the public, not demand any accountability from its most expensive subsystem?

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