

# NATIONAL-LEVEL CURRICULUM DECISION-MAKING IN FINLAND, SINGAPORE, AND THE US

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## ABSTRACT

This paper's purpose is to understand different approaches to the national-level curriculum decision-making by looking at three systems: Finland, Singapore, and the US. Although rhetorical and administrative shifts towards centralization are common to many countries under international testing practices, the structure and function of national-level school curriculum, the composition of actors in centralized agencies, and the driving rationale for education centralization, all vary by country due to their differing administrative structures, and histories, and institutionalized curriculum decision-making practices. Based on literature reviews, this paper compares three different approaches to curriculum centralization by questioning and answering who decides on curricula, and how, in the current international testing and comparison policy context. The three examined cases reveal that in each the justification rationale for curriculum centralization is strikingly similar, and that the influence of traditional curriculum decision-makers weakens, whereas new policy actors arise.

**Keywords:** national-level curriculum decision-making; curriculum centralization

## INTRODUCTION

Curriculum decision-making is an "intricate and skilled social process whereby, individually, and collectively, we identify the questions to which we must respond, establish grounds for deciding on answers, and then choose among the available solutions" (Reid, 1978, P. 43).

Fundamentally, curriculum decisions are a political process defined by uncertainty, practicality and complexity, and which require procedural knowledge and prudent and moral reasoning (Reid, 1978, 1988). They are uncertain in that the grounds for decision are unclear, aims are conflictual, problems relate to unique contexts, and people with diverse interests are affected by the solutions (Reid, 1978). Unavoidable conflictual movements within the deliberation process could be seen as fuel for democratic and vital decision-making which can promote education reform (Frey, 2008). Curriculum decisions also have moral and ethical elements, particularly at the national-level, because they should be 'responsible and justifiable acts with public significance' (Scheffler, 1973, p. 461).

K-12 national-level curricula are at the core of nations' education reforms, thus require national-level decision-making and consensus procedures. Although rhetorical and administrative shifts towards centralization are common in many countries under international testing practices, the structures and functions of national-level school curricula, the composition of actors in centralized agencies, and the driving rationales for education centralization, all vary by countries due to their administrative structures and curriculum decision-making practices. By comparing different countries' national-level curriculum decision-making approaches, this author (Jang) addresses the complexity of the notion of rhetorical and administrative curriculum centralization phenomena.

This paper's primary purpose is to understand three different approaches to national-level curriculum decision-making by comparing three systems, namely Finnish, Singaporean, and US American. Those three cases were chosen because they have significantly distinguishable approaches to national-level curriculum decision-making. Whereas both Finland and Singapore often are mentioned in the comparative education policy arena because of their successful stories and quality national-level curriculum, the US had been left out in national-level curriculum discussions until their recent centralization project of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This extended literature review (Jang's) will examine each system and try to discern who are the decision-makers on curricula, and how, in the current international testing and comparison policy context, those decisions are arrived at.

This author begins by reviewing the literature on national-level curriculum decision-making relative to the current notion of administrative and rhetorical centralization in education policy. In the section after that, she examines and compares the three above-identified national-level curriculum decision-making approaches. And in the last section she concludes by discussing the complexity of centralization phenomena in education policy. Why School Curriculum Centralization?

To understand the phenomenon of school curriculum centralization, it is helpful to start with the concept of curriculum control. Curriculum control or governance is often about the allocation of constitutional authority across governmental levels, often framed as centralization versus decentralization, or top-down *versus* bottom-up. Formal institutions and actors at different governmental levels wield power and make curriculum

decisions that influence teaching and learning.

Curriculum control goes beyond the matter of who writes a curriculum. It also relates to the characteristics and purposes of the developed curriculum, along with the degree of legal compulsion it requires (Tanner & Tanner, 2007). Example: writers of national-level or state-level curricula decide the degree of specificity of the document; the more the curriculum developers prescribe, the less the autonomy of schools and teachers (Porter et al., 1990). Also, the more aggressive the central curriculum agencies' motivation is for control of education, the more those developed curricula accompany legal and administrative tools to mandate their aligned implementation (Kirst & Wirt, 2009).

In the previous two decades of education policy contexts, the shift towards strong curriculum control often has come with legal and administrative strategies to hold schools accountable.<sup>i</sup> A common policy maneuver to regulate curriculum implementation is the interweaving of curriculum policies with a testing regime (McDonnell, 2004; Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Porter et al., 1991). And in many countries, education officials increasingly have relied on student testing as a tool for holding schools accountable to *externally* imposed standards (McDonnell, 2004). For example, during the standards movement in the US, many states have revamped their assessment systems so as to align them closely with specific content and performance standards (Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Kirst & Wirt, 2009). This particular curriculum control strategy gains more power in an era of international comparisons and testing (Baker & LeTendre, 2005).

Current national-level education policy-makers in many countries are influenced by the notion of *international testing* and comparisons. International agents diffuse norms, models, and techniques of testing and assessment; those agents include Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and The World Bank. For some countries, the impetus for assessment and testing comes by way of conformist coercion and other pressures but generally, those international organizations can have greater salience than national ones in accounting for the diffusion of educational reforms (Kamens & McNeely, 2010).

The growth of the impact of international testing on domestic policy making is based on the broad notion that education is 'a central requirement for national economic development and political democratization' (Kamens & McNeely, 2010, p.5); and the practices of international benchmarking are means to reach that. Baker and LeTendre (2005) found that international testing often fuels interest in national assessments, and works as stimuli for further cycles of educational reform. Results in international comparisons including The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) often associate with national pride and economic competitiveness rhetoric in the contexts of curriculum reform.

Historically, even prior to dissemination of international testing data, arguments existed in domestic education policy contexts that education would help countries be more economically competitive in the global market (McDonnell, 2004; Tanner & Tanner, 2007; Macpherson, 1990; Goodson, 1990). For example, most notably *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 in the US resulted from the 1980-82 recession and fear of increasing global competition, and called for the stronger school curriculum control (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). Echoed by newspapers and media, the perception of national crisis and the need for a national-level curriculum quickly diffused to the public, at least in many western nation-states (Goodson, 1990). These arguments, which assume connections between well-defined standards and assessments and economic competitiveness, easily have been adopted by politicians, business leaders, and education reformers (McDonnell, 2004).

In the preceding three decades, discourses around the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills- and data-driven educational decisions also have fueled the impact of international testing and comparisons in domestic educational policy-making environments. First, a global interest in the essential 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills - i.e., problem solving, communication, teamwork, technology use, innovation etc. - was witnessed (Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). The view formed that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is a time of global network of economic, technological, political, social and ecological interconnections, thus it calls for individuals with those common skills from a human-capital perspective (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Advocates of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills commonly view education as a means to economic prosperity, exemplified by the label '*golden ticket to a brighter economic future*' (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 73). Within 21<sup>st</sup> Century discourses, education draws attention from other sectors as a means for economic competitiveness, and invites non-traditional policy actors into education decisions (Davis, 2013).

Enhanced attention to data-driven decision-making in public policy is another factor which heightens the impact of international testing in domestic educational policy-making (Marsh et al., 2006; McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b). Data-driven policy-making requires data to make decisions to act and often calls for additional information for the efficacy of decisions in increasing accountability. In education, achievement test data particularly have become the most prominent elements in accountability policies (Marsh et al., 2006). Implicit in data-driven decision making notions is an assumption that data are neutral and important sources of information to achieve consensus among the public on conflicting education agendas; McDonnell (2004) described testing as "useful policy strategies based on persuasion that diffuses that notion of what constitutes a good education to society with its accompanying link to curriculum standards" (p. 181).

### Case 1: The Finnish System

The Finnish system gives substantial autonomy to local schools and teachers. While Finland's national core curriculum guides local schools and teachers, those teachers still develop a more detailed curriculum for their students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In the past, before the empowerment of teachers from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, the national core curriculum documents exceeded 700 pages of prescriptions (Vitikka et al., 2012). However, the current national core curriculum is *much* briefer (approximately 10 pages), guiding teachers in collectively developing local curricula and assessments (Darling-Hammond, 2010). As a result of policymakers' large investment in teachers by policymakers, those teachers have substantial autonomy in planning teaching and learning. That autonomy allow them to continue to try new ideas and methods, and to learn through innovations and inquiry (Sahlberg, 2007). The national core curriculum works as a framework around which local curricula are designed (Vitikka et al., 2012).

In the 1970s, curriculum reforms started by eliminating tracking-based academic ability; a common curriculum was developed throughout the entire system (Darling-Hammond, 2010). However, in those days it was strongly centralized; in the 1985 curriculum reform, Basic Education Act, directions emerged for decentralization and teacher autonomy (Vitikka et al., 2012). In the curriculum reform of 1994, rights of the local municipal authorities were recognized, and they were given more decision-making powers (Vitikka et al., 2012). Example: textbooks and school inspections by centralized agencies were abolished, and school-based decision-making became important (Vitikka et al., 2012). However, the 2004 curriculum reform shifted back to centralization emphasizing national-level decision-making (Vitikka et al., 2012). Moreover, national-level assessment was introduced (Finnish National Board of Education, 2011).

Based on Sahlberg's work (2007, 2009), Darling-Hammond (2010) argued that Finnish practice differs from many other countries' curriculum practice because they are not enforcing curriculum standardization of through frequent external tests, and are not narrowing the curriculum to basic skills in reading and mathematics. Darling-Hammond averred that Finland does not use national assessment as a curriculum-control policy instrument, but uses a centrally-developed assessment of *samples of students* for curriculum improvement purposes, instead of holding schools accountable. In Finland, the national core curriculum document serves two functions: first, as an administrative steering document, and second, as a guiding document for teachers to develop their teaching practice (Vitikka et al., 2012).

The Council of State decides the general goals of education as well as the time allocation for subjects based on the Basic Education Act and decrees (Vitikka et al., 2012). General goals of education and time allocation for subject matters are sensitive critical decisions in designing national-level curricula. The National Board of Education writes the national curriculum (Finnish National Board of Education, 2006) and education providers document their own local curricula. School officials of the municipality approve the curriculum for school-level (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008). Local-decision making reinforces teachers' and local officials' sense of ownership of the curriculum (Halinen & Järvinen, 2008). The sole part not governed by public education agents is textbooks; private publishers translate curriculum documents into education resources (Heinonen, 2005).

Although the process of curriculum development is hierarchical, in two recent reforms (1994, 2004), participants comprised expanded retinues of not only education professionals and parents, but also a broad range of interest groups, such as administrators, unions, education providers, and schools (Vitikka et al., 2012). Vitikka et al. (2012) argues that developing and establishing systems for collaboration is a crucial part of their success; and their procedural knowledge, which makes curricular deliberation possible, is the result of their previous practices. And they have developed ways to invite various players into the deliberation process; for example, the Parliamentary Committee of the Future, includes both private- and public representatives with the key stakeholders of the society, as a way to build consensus (Sahlberg, 2011). In the past, subject-specialist groups mainly participated in developing curriculum, and it was fragmented; however, changing the structure and the function of the national core curriculum document, from a course of study to a normative consensus about education and learning goals, as an agreed-upon written platform for further curricular deliberation, allows creation of a collaborative system (Vitikka et al., 2012). More, the culture of active nongovernmental organizations (as many as 130,000 registered nongovernmental groups or societies) and of each citizen belonging to three associations or societies on average, is ample opportunity to learn social skills, problem solving, and leadership for deliberation (Sahlberg, 2011).

The Finnish National Core Curriculum (2004) is common ground for further deliberation about teaching and learning, and is legitimized by the need for national unity, equity, and the basic rights of education (Vitikka et al., 2012). Ever since Finns reached national consensus on the idea of quality-equal basic education for everyone in the 1970s, these principles have led school reforms and have been restated in national core curriculum documents (Vitikka et al., 2012). The need for quality-equal basic education is strong justification for a centrally-controlled curriculum. In the postwar era, education was the means of social and economic development in Finland, and drew growing interest among the public (Sahlberg, 2011). High societal interest in education set the basis for national-level consensus, and provided a culture of wide deliberation.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, from the business sector and the conservative rightwing, against the

comprehensive schools, came push-back against the quality of equal school reform. Their argument was that egalitarian ideas jeopardize the economy and the prosperity of Finnish society, thus the nation needs to revert to the old streaming and tracking system, allowing a competitive element into the system (Sahlberg, 2011). In 1988 business leaders initiated a survey of the *actual* state of the comprehensive schools, which discerned that the egalitarian system was defeating individual talent by employing a unified curriculum in all classrooms (Sahlberg, 2011). Arguments supporting a more competitive market economy gained more strength with the emerging New Public Management since the PISA study where Finnish students excelled more than most other countries in reading, mathematics and science, those domestic criticisms against comprehensive schools have decreased (Sahlberg, 2011).

Possibilities are available for change in the decision-making structure or the formation of decision-makers in the future. Example: in the mid-1990s the business sector pushed for change in school curricula (Volanen, 2001), driven by the severe economic recession at the beginning of 1993 (Sahlberg, 2011). Nokia, then a leading Finnish company, argued how important it is to highlight creativity, problem-solving, interdisciplinary projects and teaching methods in school curricula (Sahlberg, 2009). Also, echoing the knowledge economy and the 21 st Century skills discourses in many other countries, the arguments that schools should teach practical and higher-order thinking and applicable skills gained power in Finland (Vitikka & Hurmeerinta, 2011).

#### Case 2: The Singaporean System

Singapore is a significant city-state with a population similar to Finland's. However, the Singapore national-level curriculum decision-making system limits individual school and teacher autonomy through a highly-centralized curriculum development process led by the Ministry of Education.

Since the mid-1990s, the Singapore government has been attentive to decentralization. However, school- and cluster-level education practices remained regulated by the Ministry of Education (Tan & Ng, 2007; Gopinathan & Deng, 2006). Tan and Ng (2007) analyzed that Singaporean decentralization, led by a central agency, was initiated primarily for the effectiveness of education governance, not necessarily for promoting teacher autonomy. In other words, decentralization was introduced as another policy control instrument. When these decentralization education reforms reached the school-level, they gave more powers to *principals* in decision-making, rather than to *teachers and students* (Tan & Ng, 2007). The purpose of decentralization reforms was for better management, not for active political and civil participation.

Singaporean centralized education governance aligns with the general government's robust interventionist approach, which supports collectivism propaganda to hold a diverse population together for national advancement (Tan & Ng, 2007). The official vision of Singaporean education, Thinking Schools Learning Nation (TSLN) reform, encourages school-level autonomy to promote project-type learning and higher-order thinking skills; however, those school-level decisions require approval by the Ministry of Education (Tan & Ng, 2007; Tan, 2007). Moreover, National Terminal Examinations still are controlled by the central office, a most-powerful curriculum control strategy (Tan, 2007). For example, although TSLN allows schools to cut away 30% of the mandated curriculum by the central agency, to experiment with school-based creative and critical thinking programs, many teachers use this time to train their students for exams (Vaish, 2014).

The Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore (CDIS), formed in 1981 under aegis of the Ministry of Education - MOE, prescribed primary and lower secondary-level curricula in the 1980s (Vaish, 2014). For upper secondary-level, Singapore used the Cambridge Examination Syndicate (CES) syllabi for the O and A levels, and a per-decade committee was established to examine syllabi in comparison to those used in the United Kingdom (Toh et al., 1996). A high-stakes examination system was also started in the 1980s (Gopinathan & Deng, 2006). In 2004, a curriculum reform was based on recommendations of the Junior College/Upper Secondary Education Review Committee, appointed by MOE - mainly comprising senior MOE officials, tertiary professors, school principals, and experienced classroom teachers (Gopinathan & Deng, 2006). Unlike Finland, the Singaporean curriculum decision-making process is not open to parents, business sector, teacher unions, and non-governmental organizations.

A key function of Singapore's education system is sorting students. Ho (2012) found that the curriculum differs significantly in content for the three main ability groups. Students in three ability tracks determined by academic achievement - i.e., the elite Integrated Program (IP), the mainstream Express and Normal Academic track (E/NA) and the vocational Normal Technical (NT) track, learn different citizenship knowledge; only IP students have the opportunity to learn a rich curriculum in social studies, with alternative forms of assessment such as project work and participation in social action so they can be prepared for future leadership roles. Ho (2012) analyzed that this is due to the ruling party's belief in democratic elitism and its allocation of education resources by merit. When the central education agency has power to place students into different tracks, thereby ultimately determining students' futures, any district-level or school-level decision-making becomes minor. As long as MOE retains authority to sort students by high-stakes assessments, schools, teachers, parents, and students voluntarily will stream themselves into the central agency. The Singapore national-level curriculum is a social cohesion instrument as well. When former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched TSLN in 1997, he introduced National Education (NE) as part of the reform. His rationale was that

young Singaporeans - born after independence - knew little about Singapore's history (Koh, 2006). Speaking with school students, he was appalled at their ignorance of Singapore's history, so immediately established a committee to develop NE (Tai & Chin, 2007), not to be taught as a separate subject but to be infused into social studies, civics, moral education, history, geography, and the "general paper" (Koh, 2006). At *elementary* level, NE's goal is to "Love Singapore"; at *secondary* level, it is to "Know Singapore"; and at *junior-college* level, it is to "Lead Singapore" (Tai & Chin, 2007). Koh (2006) analyzed that the explicit justification of implementing NE was as a response to globalization that may erode the Asian ethos and values of the youth; but that it actually reflects the paradigms of the ruling political party of Singapore and is designed to produce conformist thinking.

The two repeating justifications for strong centralized education authority are social cohesion and economic competitiveness. The social cohesion rationale is due to Singapore's diverse demographics (Tan & Ng, 2006). Regarding economic competitiveness, political agencies have been repeating that Singapore has few natural resources and small land; thus the development of human capital through the national school system is an important mandate of the government (Vaish, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Economic competitiveness is still the main motivation for education reform in Singapore. Example: TSLN was initiated as a solution to the crisis discourse arising from the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, in which East Asian countries suffered severely (Vaish, 2014; Kramer-Dahl, 2004).

#### Case 3: The US American Approach: Common Core State Standards

The highly-localized US education governance system has been moving towards centralization over the last two decades. Technically, there is no national-curriculum in the US, but Common Core State Standards - CCSS, released in 2010 have become *national-level* standards adopted by most states. CCSS is the first national-level school curriculum standards in the US supported by the federal government.

CCSS mainly comprise i) expectations for student knowledge, and ii) skills that should be developed in K-12 in English and math (Porter, et al., 2011). They have different characteristics and purposes than the Finnish and the Singaporean national curricula. In each of the Finnish and Singaporean systems, the national curriculum is the platform, the ideological common ground for their education system, good teaching and learning, and future vision. CCSS, however, is the *content* curriculum: 'Grade placements for specific topics are made on the basis of state- and international comparisons and on the collective experience and collective professional judgment of educators, researchers, and mathematicians' (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p.5). Given the long tradition of local control and resistance to the idea of national standards in the US, it could have been relatively easier to agree on math and reading content standards because they seem to involve neutral skills, and are the subject areas tested in international comparisons. Developing a national curriculum similar to those in Finland and Singapore requires society-level consensus on highly value-laden ideologies; it is not easy for any big and diverse country with the tradition of strong localism, including the U.S., to reach such consensus.

Leaders of the CCSS initiative were well aware of the messy negotiating and political nature of curricular decision-making, at least in the past, based on personal judgments. By asserting the guiding principle of the development process, driven by evidence and research, they tried to, and to some extent were able to, avoid past ideological debates (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). According to McDonnell and Weatherford (2013), there have been more than 25 organizations in promoting and implementing the CCSS; those include the National Governors Association (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), which represent elected officials. They have worked as *policy entrepreneurs* in developing the CCSS (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Policy entrepreneurs are "advocates ... willing to invest their resources - time, energy, reputation, money - to promote a position in return for anticipated future gain in the form of material, purposive, or solidary benefits" (Kingdon, 1995, p. 179). Others who are not policy entrepreneurs but support CCSS are parents groups, private education providers, foundations, civil rights organizations, and teacher unions (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Developing standards was possible via the organized leadership of CCSSO and NGA. Based on the failure of former administrations to move on national standards, CCSSO and NGA sought to avoid the ideological controversies (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). One of their strategies was to promote research and evidence-based policy process (Wilhoit, 2009). Also, they needed to ensure that the CCSS is represented by various interest groups, expressly state officials and classroom teachers. Groups representing those constituencies were consulted regularly and reviewed draft standards (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013), a successful strategy as evidenced by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT)'s and National Education Association (NEA)'s claim that CCSS reflects the perspective of classroom teachers (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013).

CCSSO, NGA, and their allies have *kept a visible distance* from the US Department of Education throughout this process, as if they were to carry on the CCSS as a state-led effort (Rothman, 2011). Federal legislators and policymakers were informed about CCSS but stayed out of the initiative (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). Unlike Singapore, centralization by demand will face huge resistance, given the long tradition of local control and heterogeneity in the US; national-level curricula in the US needs more persuasion, less ideology, and more scientific (or scientifically sounding) justification, compared to Finland, and Singapore.

A rationale for CCSS advocates, prominently led by two former state governors (North Carolina, West Virginia), was international competitiveness (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b). They argued that US student achievement is low compared to global economic competitors' achievements, and that "countries with high-achieving students have focused, rigorous, and coherent national standards" (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013b, p. 121).

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation mostly funded the development of CCSS (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013), between 2008 and mid-2013 spending over US\$200-million on it and the concept of college- and career-ready standards (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). The Foundation also invested in efforts to create collaborative policy networks; the funding sufficiently motivated group members to commit to a long process and to coordinate their work with other unfamiliar or sometimes opposing groups (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). McDonnell and Weatherford (2013) found that the Foundation's funding offered time for diverse actors to build trust and to collaborate.

After CCSS was written, the federal government, by packaging the use of high-quality career and college-ready content standards with the competitive grants and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) waiver, played an important role in dissemination of the CCSS under the Race to the Top – RTTT program. (Wong, 2013). To win grants and the NCLB waiver, states tend to adopt the CCSS as one of their key strategies to raise student performance (Wong, 2013). Jeffrey Henig (2007) viewed the RTTT program as masking rearrangement of authority, which potentially could harm education institutional autonomy, because the way states compete for institutional innovations, and the zero-sum aspect of governance, enhance the power of a central education agency.

### Three Different Approaches to National-level Curriculum Decision-Making

The cases of Finland, Singapore, and the US, reveal that the idea of curriculum centralization may unfold differently depending on their domestic policy environment. Different policy environment - i.e., the context of the constitutional arrangements of jurisdiction, previous related-policy practices, culture and social norms, etc., has huge implications for the style of governance applied to education and to the actors involved in curriculum decision-making (See also, Mintrom & Walley, 2013). Centralized curriculum can be authorized through social elements such as legal status, norms, expertise, and organized advocacy (Spady & Mitchell, 1979). Social elements authorizing national-level curricula vary in all three. Table 1 summarizes key differences between Finnish, Singaporean, and the US American national-level curriculum decision-making approaches, characterized thus: *civic model* (Finland), *authoritarian model* (Singapore), and *policy network model* (US American).

Table 1. Key Characteristics of National-Level Curriculum Decision-Making Approaches

	Finland Civic model	Singapore Authoritarian model	US American Policy network model
Policy Environment	Advanced civic society (Sahlberg, 2011)	Democratic elitism (Ho, 2012)	Tradition of local control (Kirst & Wirt, 2009) Policy entrepreneurship (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013)
Actors participating in decision-making process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finnish National Board of Education (Education professionals, parents, administrators, unions, education providers, schools (Vitikka et al., 2012))</li> <li>• <i>Parliamentary Committee for the Future</i> includes private and public representatives (Sahlberg, 2011)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MOE</li> <li>• Junior College/ Upper Secondary Education Review Committee appointed by MOE (senior MOE officers, tertiary professors, school principals, and experienced classroom teachers) (Gopinathan &amp; Deng, 2006)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25-plus organizations include National Governors Association (NGA), Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), representing <i>elected</i> officials</li> <li>• Parents groups</li> <li>• Private education providers</li> <li>• Foundation (The Bill &amp; Melinda Gates Foundation)</li> <li>• Civil rights organizations</li> <li>• Teacher unions (McDonnell &amp; Weatherford, 2013)</li> </ul>

Document formats	Normative consensus about goals of education and learning as a written platform	Ideological platform (including National Education; NE) and a course of study	Specific subjects (English and math) content standards
Official justification for centrally-controlled curriculum	Need for equal basic education	Need for central authority to sort students, and social cohesion	Need for competitiveness in international testing

A prominent characteristic of the Finnish system is the wide range of citizen participants in national-level curriculum-*deliberation*. Finnish national-level curriculum decision-*making* is led by the Finnish National Board of Education, managed by Board directors who represent political decision-making, local authorities, teachers, and social partners.

(*vide* FNBE website [http://www.oph.fi/english/about\\_fnbe/task\\_services\\_and\\_organisation](http://www.oph.fi/english/about_fnbe/task_services_and_organisation)).

Board formation is not limited to traditional education actors (i.e., education experts, administrators, and teachers) but also is open to instances outside education (i.e., parliamentarians) and in the public arena (i.e., business representatives). Members are appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture. Finnish Core Curriculum then is reviewed outside education-related institutions such as the Parliamentary Committee of the Future, where 17 elected parliamentarians autonomously decide various policies related to the future and serve as a think-tank. According to Sahlberg (2009), Finland’s advanced civil society creates a good environment for effective private and public collaboration.

In the Singapore approach, in contrast, the central office (the Ministry of Education - MOE) has hegemonic power in national-level curriculum decision-making. Not only content standards are regulated strongly by MOE, but also the implementing process, national assessment, teaching and learning approaches, instructional materials, etc ...

(*vide*: MOE website: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/about/org-structure/cpdd>).

As in the case of NE (Tai & Chin, 2007), the Singapore national curriculum is used as an effective political communication tool transmitting collectivistic, social-cohesive, and democratic elitism ideologies by political elites. With their power to sort *elite* students, the MOE (and political elites in central government) easily infuse their values into the national curriculum.<sup>ii</sup> If one’s early success in the education system determines one’s future position in society, submission to national curriculum and to MOE is an inevitable choice for most individuals; either voluntarily or involuntarily, they contribute to the reproduction of those hidden values.

In the US, the CCSS case is unique because of policy entrepreneurship and policy network led by state-level general politicians (NGA) and education philanthropists.<sup>iii</sup> State governors, not necessarily education professionals, established agenda and drew public attention to the need of national-level content standards. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, venture education philanthropists and powerful policy entrepreneurs in the US educational policy context, funded the CCSS project. Unlike Finland and Singapore, the CCSS tried to keep administrative distance from the central government and appealed that the CCSS initiative is *not* an attempt to top-down curriculum control. It was politically important to advertise CCSS as state-led reform, for CCSS to succeed in the US political context. Thus the CCSS case in the US remained as a technically local (state-led) initiative. However, once CCSS was released, many efforts and incentives were made to expand its implementation of to national-level - i.e., the RTTT requirement. Compared to Finland and Singapore, the CCSS project was an *initiative*, shaped by policy entrepreneurs via policy *network* form. In Finland and Singapore, national-level curriculum decision-making process is an established *official* process; however, since CCSS was almost the first national-level curriculum drafting and implementing project in the US, it had an advantage for agenda setting and mobilizing attention and support. By intentionally avoiding official and top-down trajectory and adding grass-root flare, the CCSSO was able to mobilize a wide arrange of supporting organizations.

In Finland and the US, the change in social expectations seemed to place pressure on different sets of individuals and groups to participate in education governance. For example, in the US, a set of new actors, including mayors, state governors, and presidents, seeks to achieve greater control over traditional forms of school governance; this ultimately weakens the influence of traditional curriculum policy actors (Henig, 2013; Allen & Mintrom, 2010). In Finland, push-back from the business sector increased in the 90s until the recent dissemination of international comparison data, used as evidence to support the excellence of their current system.

For both Finland and the US (and, to some extent, Singapore), *democracy* or *participatory* decision-making seem one of the important administrative values in the national-level curriculum decision-making process. In the public policy arena, participatory policy-making has been considered a strong policy instrument of persuasion. Since it appears to be democratic, it reduces the chances of resistance by creating a sense of ownership among citizens (Michels & Graaf, 2010; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). This explains why traditional

educational policy actors lose their power to parents' groups, business people, and politicians. However, except for Finland where the national-level core curriculum document leaves substantial autonomy for classroom teachers, their status and their decision-making power in the growing assertion of curriculum centralization is obscure. Given that site-based management arguments assume the expertise and commitment of teachers in curriculum decisions (Porter et al., 1991), teachers and teacher organizations are expected to be a part of *official* curriculum decision-making. In both Singapore and the US, in their official reports classroom teachers were part of the decision making, but were their presence in the process more symbolic than actual? Participatory policy making can be mere formality, creating a false sense of ownership among citizens, and giving ways for government (and leading policy groups) to be blameless (Michels & Graaf, 2010).

Deciding what to be taught in public school classroom is a value-laden *public* issue. Regardless of the level of curriculum decisions, from school-level to national-level curricula, curriculum design is the outcome of dynamic, political, collective, and not-yet-completed justification interactions among curriculum decision makers (Walker, 1971). In complex and heterogeneous contemporary society, building a national-level consensus on the matter of school curricula is becoming more difficult for a *single* organization. As the case of the CCSS shows, to initiate national-level curriculum that gains nation-wide support, policymaking arrangements should go beyond traditional hierarchical institutional arrangement. Moreover, the CCSS case suggests ways to avoid ideological conflicts by limiting decisions to specific subject-content standards and excluding the ideological foundation of national education that has the potential to become messy.<sup>iv</sup>

In Singapore, strong institutional authority is still empirical, top-down, curriculum control strategy; the MOE achieves compliance through demand. However, in many other countries, including Finland and the US, increasing diversity and public demand for transparency and accountability in government decisions make Singaporean hierarchical governance less feasible. In particular, transmitting ideological values via mandated national curricula - i.e., NE in Singapore - could be criticized as a form of state indoctrination. For example "Love one's country" (the NE standard) could mean different things for different people with different perspectives.<sup>v</sup> Since curriculum decisions are ultimately the choice of preference and value judgement, it will become even harder to reach national-level consensus on highly controversial ideologies in the future.

Along with democracy or participatory decision-making, *efficiency* is another essential administrative value in the national-level curriculum decision-making process. In education administration history, policy beliefs about strong curriculum control have been picked up by diverse policy actors as means to standardize practice and to increase the efficiency of the education system (Porter et al., 1990). Example: an important CCSS rationale was state-to-state variability and substantial redundancy in previous state standards (Porter et al., 2011; National Research Council, 2008). Achieving high quality of public education through building individual teacher and school capacity requires much time and effort. Since the present demand for public education system is that it ensures suitable quality available for as many students as possible (Mintrom & Wally, 2013), *efficiency* becomes even more important.

Regardless the increase in diversity and difficulty in reaching national-level consensus in contemporary society, the language of performance is a universally accepted principle in administration and public policy. In all three approaches, the dissemination of international testing data as educational performance is fueling justification of curriculum centralization. The language of performance and international comparison repeats traditional nation-building discourse.<sup>vi</sup> That discourse often is associated with psychological aspects, such as fear; for example, the intensity of the discourse increased in the time of the Cold War, the Nation at Risk, and recession (Kirst & Wirt, 2009). Goodson (1990) analyzed that the sequence followed by the crisis rhetoric is strikingly similar among many nation-states. With global economic recession and intense international comparisons, the platform for national-level curricula deliberations is narrowing, and an education goal that does not feed economic competitiveness has difficulty in finding strong support. The impact of dissemination of international comparison data regarding curriculum centralization policy is strikingly similar in all three instances and it signals a chance of streaming effect among cross-national curriculum contents.

#### Conclusion

This paper tried to analyze the national-level curriculum deliberation process by looking at whom will decide on curricula and what justification rationales are deployed in the process. This author specifically examined Finland, Singapore, and US America case. Those three show that curriculum centralization can unfold in widely-differing ways due to each country's policy environment. However, the dominance of the language of performance and the dissemination of international comparison data fuel curriculum centralization in all three.

The question of whom will decide on curricula receives continuing discussion and debate throughout curricular history. Answers to this are that they have been certain to change over time. According to theory (Plank & Boyd, 1994), the shift in authority originates in dissatisfaction or distrust with prevailing institutional arrangements; the distrust of the commitment or capacity of local school boards to increase academic standards underlies the shift of authority from local to state, and from the state to the national-level. However, this does not necessarily mean that new authority has verified commitment or capacity to increase student performance.



## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to curriculum centralization, a line of research and practice around school-based curriculum - or curriculum *decentralization* – has emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Discourses and efforts around school-based curriculum development often associate with *empowerment* of local schools. Curriculum centralization in this paper does not necessarily add the concept of empowering local schools. For example, in the Finland case, extensive autonomy is given to local- and school- level actors. Finland achieves its high-quality school curriculum by active division of roles; while central government sets the platform of national education, policy efforts to improve the status, capacity, and power of teachers.

<sup>2</sup> While Finnish core curriculum emphasizes the values of learning, Singapore national curriculum stresses students' identities as Singaporean. The Finnish national-level curricula document is a brief item including the objectives and core contents of different subjects, the principles of student assessment, special-needs education, student welfare and educational guidance, and written platform and framework for local schools and classroom teachers as they draw their own curricula.

<sup>3</sup> Compared to traditional philanthropists, the new generation *education* philanthropists try to fix social problem from their *roots*: diagnose the social problem, and actively decide where and how to fund, to solve the social problem. In this way, these recent education philanthropists are active in agenda-setting, mobilizing public attention, and shaping policy and political environment. Examples: The Broad Education Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, the Donald and Doris Fisher Fund, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Curriculum decision cannot be scientific or value-neutral; it is the choice of *preference*. So, the most crucial part in curriculum decision-making is to rearrange ideological and interest conflicts.

<sup>5</sup> Problems of different views or interpretations were apparent even with content-standards decision-making. In the case of CCSS, one member of the validation committee reported, the validation committee, 17 university faculty and 6 other working researchers, knew there *cannot* be sufficient evidence for any of the standards, and that it is a matter of including and involving feedback from multiple different perspectives (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013). The validation committee proved that the CCSS based its knowledge on the standards-writers' *previous* works and reputations, and 'on their knowledge of current state standards and international standards and their beliefs that CCSS are better' (McDonnell & Weatherford, 2013, p. 19).

<sup>6</sup> From 19th Century Europe, where France and Germany used the nationalism rationale to implement centralized education systems (Pang, 2004; Satoru, 1990; Lee, 2001; Yoon, 1995), to East Asian countries with highly-centralized systems and patronizing discourse that have experienced successful political and economic development in the late 20th Century (Yoon, 1995), the nation-building justification of education systems has existed for a long time.

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