

UNDERSTANDING CURRICULUM MAKING BY TEACHERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AS TEXT AND AS PRACTICE

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Abstract

Recent debates in curriculum studies have focused on the role of teachers as active curriculum makers. In this chapter, we argue for a more systemic approach to curriculum making as social practice. Our particular focus is on micro and nano curriculum making by teachers, that is curriculum making in schools and classrooms respectively, as curricular programmes are developed and enacted into practice. In making sense of these complex practices, we draw upon a theoretical typology for understanding and analysing curriculum making across different sites within education systems, and an ecological understanding of teacher agency. We apply these theoretical insights to the analysis of various influences on micro/nano curriculum, emerging from a range of recent empirical studies in five European education systems. In undertaking this analysis, we challenge prevalent notions of curriculum making as a linear process of delivery or implementation, instead seeking to understand it as interpretation and enactment across sites by multiple social actors, and tracing the multiple and dynamic connections that operate across sites and which shape micro and nano curriculum making in schools.

Keywords

Curriculum; curriculum making; teacher agency; enactment; social practice.

Introduction

Many recent debates in curriculum studies have focused on the role of teachers as active curriculum makers. According to Deng, ‘teachers are fundamentally curriculum makers – not curriculum deliverers or implementers’ (2017, p.16). Such debates have been mirrored to some extent in curricular policy. A ‘new curriculum’ approach (Biesta & Priestley, 2013) has manifested widely across the globe, involving reduced specification of curricular content in national policy, a focus on generic competencies, and so called ‘learner-centred’ methodologies (e.g., see: Young & Muller, 2010; Sinnema & Aitken, 2013). These debates are often premised on notions of school and teacher autonomy, accompanied by rhetoric about empowerment of schools. Such characteristics are invariably claimed as a self-evident good, but positioned against contradictory discourses and practices of teacher regulation through external accountability and a linear view of curriculum as a product to be delivered. Ostensibly, many new curricula do, indeed, afford considerable autonomy to teachers as curriculum makers; however, as suggested by Deng (2017, p.16), such autonomy needs to be understood in the context of the ‘academic standards and accountability movement’, which has eroded the capability of teachers to act as autonomous curriculum makers. There has been a shift in recent years from input regulation (tight specification in national policy frameworks) to output regulation (e.g., the measurement of school and teacher performance), which has exerted a profound effect on the capacity of teachers to be active curriculum makers (e.g., Biesta, 2010; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). These trends have significantly shaped the form that curriculum making takes and the risks associated with such practices, leading to a diminution in the professional agency of teachers as curriculum makers, as we shall explore subsequently in this chapter. The renewed emphasis on output regulation is strongly associated with changes to the technical form of the curriculum (Luke et al., 2012), a format comprising linear and hierarchical levels of learning outcomes that contributes to the generation of performance data used for teacher and school accountability.

What does this mean for curriculum making? In this chapter, our focus is primarily on micro and nano curriculum making by teachers, that is curriculum making in schools and classrooms respectively, as curricular programmes are developed and enacted into practice. Nevertheless, we argue for a systemic approach to curriculum that accounts for the role of macro curriculum making (e.g., policy framings) and meso curriculum making (the artefacts and practices that connect schools and teachers with policy) as significant conditions in shaping what is possible in schools and classrooms.

We start with presenting an overview of some key theoretical resources that frame our analysis. These comprise an understanding of curriculum as social practice that occurs differentially and dynamically across different sites within education systems (Priestley et al., 2021) and an ecological approach to analysing teacher’s professional agency (Priestley et al., 2015). After that, we offer a series of vignettes – empirical case studies highlighting research in several education systems – to illustrate some of the key influences that shape curriculum making in schools and classrooms. Finally, we discuss the implications for curriculum making linked to teacher agency more broadly, especially the importance of developing the conditions – individual, cultural and structural – for meaningful curriculum making by teachers.

Theoretical framings

In this section of the chapter, we first discuss the related ideas about curriculum and curriculum making which underpin our analysis. We then introduce the ecological approach to understanding teacher agency.

Curriculum making

While the primary focus of the chapter is on micro and nano curriculum making by teachers, it is important to examine these practices within a wider systemic understanding of curriculum making. As Connolly (2013) reminds us,

[curriculum] is a complex system involving teachers, students, curricular content, social settings, and all manner of impinging matters ranging from the local to the international. It is a system that needs to be understood systemically. (p. ix).

The discussion that follows will, therefore, provide a framing for locating micro and nano curriculum making in the context of the broader discursive, social and material conditions of schooling. We offer a definition here of curriculum as ‘the multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated’ (Priestley, 2019, p.8). There are at least three linked dimensions of this definition.

- The idea of curriculum as social practice; something that is done, or made, by people working with one another in particular social settings and material conditions;
- the notion that the curriculum is made in different ways within and across various layers or sites of education systems, for example schools and national agencies, and is not confined to classrooms; and
- the different practices and artefacts which comprise curriculum, such as selection of knowledge/content, pedagogical approaches and the organization of teaching.

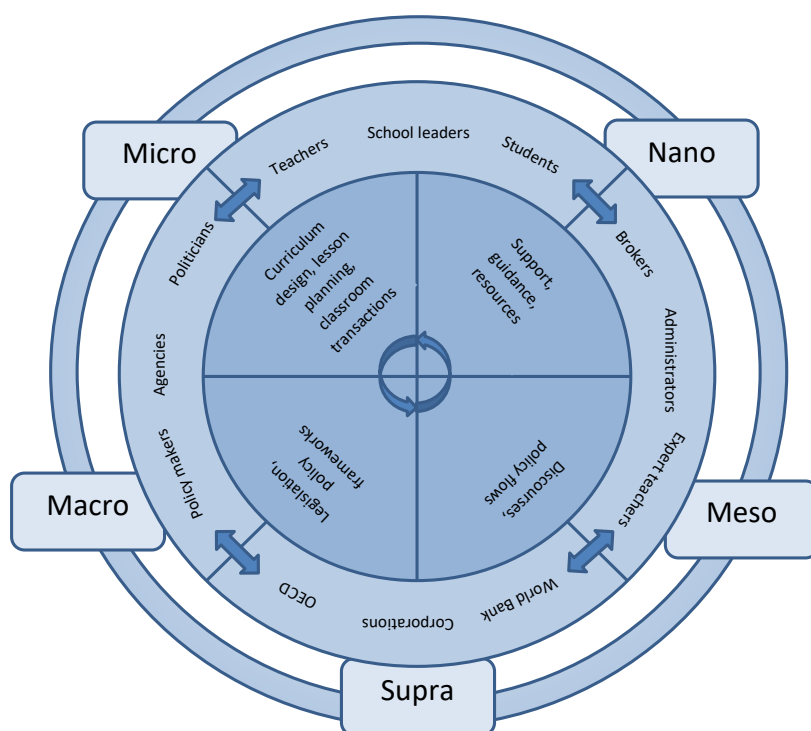
A social practice view of curriculum making offers a serious challenge to linear, top-down, policy-to-practice notions of curriculum implementation. Practitioners inevitably mediate curriculum policy, as they enact practice, even within the most prescriptive and ‘teacher-proof’ policy framings. This process is highly variable, being shaped by a multiplicity of factors, both internal and external to schools. Mediation can be constructive, focused on educational purposes, local conditions and the needs of students; or it can be more subversive and instrumental (e.g., Osborn et al., 1997). The above ideas point to the importance of thinking holistically about curriculum making and how curriculum operates as a system.

Many curriculum theorists have sought to theorize the ways in which curriculum is made systemically. Such theorizing has suggested that curriculum is made across different levels of education systems, using terminology such as ‘societal, institutional, instructional’ (Goodlad, 1979), ‘societal (ideal or abstract), programmatic (technical or official), classroom (enacted)’ (Deng, 2012), or ‘supra, macro, meso, micro, nano’ (Thijs & van den Akker, 2008). Existing approaches have variously attracted criticism for being linear and hierarchical (reinforcing policy/practice conceptions of curriculum making), being insufficiently fine-grained to capture the range of different curriculum making practices, being overly focused on institutional levels (e.g., the organizations that make curriculum), and/or focusing on products of curriculum making (e.g., national curriculum documents). Nevertheless, they provide a strong foundation for developing an alternative approach based around the idea of curriculum as social practice.

In our recent work on curriculum making (e.g., Priestley et al, 2021), we have sought to elaborate these approaches, offering the insight that curriculum making, as social practice, occurs within different sites of activity across and beyond national systems. This typology should not be read as a hierarchy of levels or layers, but as a heuristic tool to analyse curriculum making from the inside out or bottom up, as well as top down, illustrating multi-way flows of influence, information and activity

between the various sites. Consequently, we do not position sites as institutional levels or even institutional sites of formal or prescribed activity. Instead, we theorize curriculum making as types of curriculum practice that occur across education systems, as curriculum is made and remade in different contexts, engaging various social actors, who often move between sites while adopting multiple identities, for example teachers as teacher educators, or teachers as members of curriculum policy committees. This heuristic is illustrated in the diagram in figure one, below, showing the sites of activity (e.g., meso), examples of actors (e.g., teachers), and types of activity (e.g., lesson planning).

Figure One: Sites, actors and activities of curriculum making



Source: author

Curriculum making as a social practice takes many forms, not always in harmony with one another; as Westbury (2008, p. 49) reminds us, 'loosely coupled settings for curriculum decision making are in fact contexts associated with very different activities'. This approach, with its focus on sites (and types) of activity, provides a basis for understanding the systemic variables – the multiple and dynamic connections which operate across sites – that shape micro and nano curriculum making in schools.

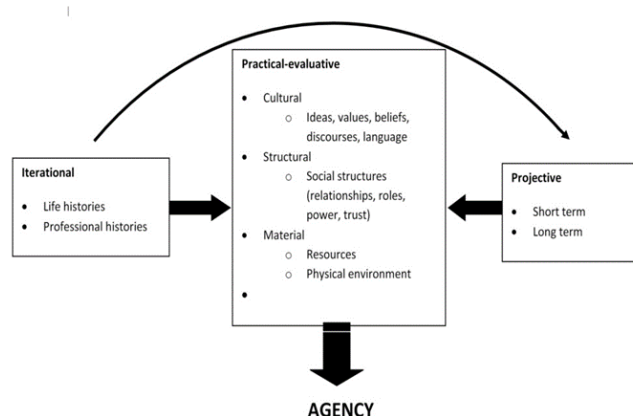
Teacher agency

Teacher agency is an important concept in curriculum making, given the aforementioned inevitability of teachers mediating curriculum policy. Here, we set out a brief summary of some key aspects of an ecological understanding of teacher agency (for more details, see: Priestley et al., 2015). This understanding of agency posits it as an emergent phenomenon – relational and temporal – rather than as a variable in social action, as it is often characterized in the longstanding structure/agency debate. It draws attention to how agency emerges in unique situations through the interaction of

qualities of individuals with their material and social contexts. Agency is, therefore, not something that a person possesses, but rather something that people achieve.

This ecological understanding of agency, following Emirbayer and Mische (1998), suggests that agency is always shaped by the dynamic interplay of three temporal dimensions – influences from the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present. This temporal/relational understanding takes into consideration ‘how this interplay varies within different structural contexts of action’ (p. 963). Emirbayer and Mische refer to these three dimensions as the iterational, the projective and the practical-evaluative. All three dimensions play a role in social action, but the degree to which they contribute varies; thus agency may be oriented more or less, and variably over time and across different contexts, towards past, present or future influences. Agency therefore manifests as a ‘temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and ‘acted out’ in the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects with the contingencies of the moment)’ (ibid., p. 963). Priestley, Biesta and Robinson (2015) have applied this ecological understanding of agency to the professional work of teachers (see figure two below).

Figure 2: An ecological understanding of teacher agency



Source: Priestley et al., 2015

In respect of the iterational dimension, the model draws attention to the influence of the more general life histories of teachers and their more specific professional histories (including both teacher education and the accumulated experience of being a teacher). The projective dimension of teacher agency relates to teachers’ abilities to form professional aspirations – both long-term and short-term future imaginaries. Such aspirations may be positive in nature, relating to the development and welfare of students, may support policy intentions or act in resistance to them, or indeed may be more narrowly instrumental. The practical-evaluative dimension is more directly related to the present context – that is, teachers’ day-to-day working environments. Teaching is a profession laden with ambiguity and professional dilemmas, being context-dependent and contestable in terms of its aims. Teachers make daily decisions that are problematic, often conflicting with their aspirations, and often with insufficient time for reflection and professional dialogue. The practical aspect relates to affordances for agency (for example, available resources) and constraints (for example, barriers to action through the exercise of coercive power). The evaluative aspects relate to judgments, for example about risk and cost/benefit. Affordances and constraints can be cultural (e.g., access to cognitive resources, pedagogical ideas, notions of professionalism), structural (e.g., relational resources available via teacher networks or subject-area counsellors) or material (e.g., the physical layout of schools and classrooms).

Vignettes: curriculum making in practice

In the next section of the chapter, we present a series of vignettes – case studies drawn from empirical research in Scotland, Wales, Cyprus, Finland, and Sweden – which illustrate different variables that influence and shape curriculum making.

For each case, we briefly set the context, before reflecting upon the conditions that shape the agency of teachers as micro/nano curriculum makers. The cases provide strong illustrations of the need to attend to individual, cultural and structural issues that affect teacher agency, when supporting curriculum making by teachers.

The role of reflexivity and networks in teachers' curriculum making: Scotland and Wales

This first vignette concerns micro and nano curriculum making by eight secondary school teachers in Scotland and Wales. Reflexivity is a key issue to consider when considering how agency is achieved. Teacher reflexivity is understood here as the different forms of reasoning processes that occur when teachers consider their concerns, themselves and their contexts in relation to actions; this process plays a significant role in mediating the effects of structural and cultural factors upon teacher agency (e.g., Hizli Alkan, 2023a). Archer's (2012) typology of different modes of reflexivity argues that reflexivity has a dynamic and heterogenous nature. Briefly, if people exercise *communicative reflexivity* in a particular spatio-temporal context, their internal conversations about curriculum making tend to require external affirmations. *Autonomous reflexivity*, however, may bring about self-sufficient internal conversations, unless there is some expertise needed that the individual does not possess. *Meta-reflexivity* manifests in continuous value-oriented self-interrogation of one's actions and circumstances. Finally, *fractured reflexivity* is exercised when people's actions are disabled and their reflexivity is suspended due to adverse situations. The above forms of reflexivity can shape teacher agency in particular ways, which we explore below.

Networks also influence the professional agency of teachers, as well as being significant influences on the modes of reflexivity practised by teachers at any particular time. Networks, in this research, refer to teachers' formal and informal connections as they talk about curriculum making. In the context of national policy change in Wales and Scotland, the complex interplay between reflexivity and networks was seen to enable or constrain teacher agency in various ways (Hizli Alkan, 2022).

In one example, a History teacher in Scotland had a strong and enduring professional identity, formed primarily around a stable and homogeneous professional network focused on assessment and qualifications. The lack of diversity in this network, combined with the strongly autonomous reflexivity practised by the teacher, meant that professional dialogue around curriculum making tended to be narrow in focus. This constrained agency, particularly in its projective orientation (i.e., a lack of consideration of alternative future actions), which ultimately resulted in the reinforcement of existing practices and curriculum narrowing.

Conversely, professional networks that incorporated meso support (e.g., local curriculum advisers) facilitated new sense-making, and appeared to enhance agency. In these networks, it was evident that such support could prompt constructive modes of reflexivity and enhance teacher agency. Nevertheless, this did not necessarily result in new forms of micro curriculum making. For example, one teacher in Wales, who was in a strong position to draw meso support and diverse expertise to

micro curriculum making, faced some resistance in her school, mostly due to colleagues' reservations about the new curriculum. In another example, in Scotland, the absence of meso support, unsatisfactory sense-making activities and a perceived lack of collegiality in his professional context, especially at the early stages of curriculum reform, seemed to trigger a fractured mode of reflexivity. This teacher became unable to make meaning in relation to conflicting messages in curriculum policy, which shaped his reasoning and decision-making. In contrast, another teacher in Scotland who exhibited meta-reflexivity, articulated rich educational discourses, had a network of diverse expertise with strong relationships, and envisaged different possibilities of curriculum making (e.g., interdisciplinarity). The professional agency of this teacher was clearly evident in her curriculum making.

This vignette portrays the complexity of curriculum making as relational practice, and the importance of addressing the needs of teachers who practise different modes of reflexivity with varying types of networks. There is a need to be cognizant of why different concerns and actions emerge and develop, to mitigate or cultivate particular practices, depending on the teachers' sense of engagement and agency over curriculum making work. Findings from the research suggest that fostering diverse connections across different schools and stakeholders through meso support enables teachers to have opportunities to develop ways of engaging with novel connections. This can interrupt and expand their limited network connections, potentially developing their professional agency. To develop meta-reflexivity, there needs to be a secure and supportive climate for teachers to voice their ideas, and a mechanism that would take their critical reflections into account; in other words, a space for teacher agency to be enacted. This is because the absence of such support mechanisms may trigger more fractured forms of reflexivity, as evidenced in this research, which ultimately militate against constructive curriculum making practices. Finally, meso support, including coaching and mentoring and the communication of consistent, practical and achievable aims, might help some teachers exhibiting fractured reflexivity to develop more constructive modes of reflexivity. The next vignette takes us into this territory.

Teachers' curriculum making in schools and classrooms in Cyprus as a contextual(ized) social practice

The second vignette illustrates how teacher professionalism might inform curriculum making, also exemplifying how the practical-evaluative dimension is rooted in the iterational dimension. It draws from a longitudinal study of Greek-Cypriot primary school teachers' sense of professionalism during the most recent cycle of educational reform launched by the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) in the Republic of Cyprus (including implementation of new curricula in public schools, 2010-2016). The motto of 'a democratic and humane school' was adopted, to encapsulate a vision of transforming schools, traditionally shaped by academic rationalist ideologies, into more progressive/child-centred approaches, while teachers were recast as 'autonomous professional pedagogues', rather than 'public servant(s)' or 'technocrat(s)' (MoEC, 2004, p. 16). The curriculum review of official texts between 2008-2010 involved over 300 volunteer teachers as participants in subject-area committees, alongside appointed academics and ministry technocrats, and was envisioned as a 'democratic' bottom-up process.

After the new curriculum texts were introduced in 2010, teachers positioned themselves in multifarious ways, veering between multiple conceptualizations of teacher professionalism and proffering different claims of/for autonomy and guidance (Philippou, Kontovourki & Theodorou, 2014). Throughout this process, the MoEC sustained a central role in both the development of the new official curriculum texts and the related provision of professional development to teachers (Philippou et al., 2016); however, a variety of conditions led to intense experimentation and 'openings' for 'making curricula' in schools and classrooms.

First, the participation of teacher volunteers in the curriculum review committees enabled the emergence of forms of meso curriculum making; some of them continued their involvement in the implementation of the curriculum as subject-area counsellors (i.e., as seconded teachers with teaching experience and subject-relevant academic credentials) participating in the provision of mass and mandatory professional development in 2010-2011, followed between 2011-2013 by considerable decentralized curriculum making activity in schools, as teachers tried to implement the new curriculum (Philippou et al., 2016).

Such activity continued to involve subject-area counsellors, an institution characterized by considerable variation, both because of teachers' own understandings of the new curriculum and because of subject-area counsellors' understandings of their professional role, with a spectrum of more or less structured guidance and variable availability to teachers. The subject-area counsellor emerged as an institution, as a particular type of teacher-subject, offering valuable expertise for curriculum making in micro and nano sites, while often having already been involved in the revision of the curriculum texts at the macro site, thus becoming a dynamic meso site of curriculum-making (Kontovourki et al., 2021). Teachers collaborated with them to design and enact lesson plans or units in their schools and classrooms, which, in some subject-areas, were fed back into the macro site of production of teaching materials and textbooks. Aspects of nano and micro site curriculum making thus influenced the macro site through subject-area counsellors, whose activity traversed administrative boundaries between different sites of activity.

Such processes continued, albeit in different forms, when the curriculum implementation was halted in 2013; a new government launched a curriculum evaluation of the 2010 official texts, resulting in their final publication online in 2016 as 're-structured' curriculum. These covered purposes, pedagogy and assessment, but, significantly, also included additional and numerous detailed and hierarchical 'success and efficiency indicators'. These learning outcomes and matching content specifications (defined as knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes), distinct for each subject-area and grade, gave the curriculum texts a strongly guided technical form (Chrysostomou & Philippou, 2022).

From the teachers' perspectives, curriculum making became more demanding and complex, as they grappled with these lengthy tables of indicators, the central production (of varied timelines) of new teaching materials to match the indicators, and the need to consult different subject-area counsellors for each subject in primary education. In an ethnographic multiple case study of five primary teachers teaching Language, Arts and Social Studies in 2015-2016, researchers traced how curriculum enactment did not constitute only responses to ongoing curricular reform, but also reflected established understandings regarding these teachers' roles and professionalism, with historical roots both in the local and socio-political context and their own life histories. An example of this has been the subject-area of History, for which the new curriculum texts were revised to adopt a more disciplinary, inquiry approach; this cohered in the newly-written textbooks for younger grades, but more traditional, ethnocentric approaches remained present in official textbooks for the older grades. Varied curriculum making in History was thus evident, as teachers negotiated the new curriculum and varied textbooks based on different personal/professional experiences and different understandings of History, and to address different classroom and school contexts with varied actors, including pupils. Nano curriculum making in these sites, therefore, implied different rationalities for History's purposes and boundaries with other subject-areas, not always coherent to the macro site (Philippou, 2020). Moreover, while one case study teacher was facilitated by the availability of new textbooks written with a disciplinary approach, her curriculum making was also informed by her broader consideration of the profession as a mainly scientific/academic one, enacting an academically demanding curriculum (which in History was instantiated through an

inquiry approach) as a ‘public service’. Curriculum making was thus found to be strongly conditioned to teachers’ biographies and notions of professionalism (Philippou, 2020; Kontovourki et al., 2018).

Teacher agency and transversal competences and subject integration in Finland

In the third vignette, we explore the crucial role of sense-making in enabling the professional agency of teachers – particularly in its iterational and projective dimensions – as curriculum makers, drawing from several linked studies in Finland (e.g., Soini et al., 2021). In Finland, the national core curriculum sets the general goals for school education; however, districts, schools and teachers are highly autonomous in determining the local curriculum. In the latest curriculum reform (2014), local curriculum makers, principals, educational leaders in municipalities and teachers had a lot of autonomy in the creation of the local curriculum on the basis of the national core. An important meso process was orchestrated by the National Agency for Education, comprising officials and hundreds of invited experts, following a socio-cognitive approach (Spillane et al., 2002) and a participatory implementation strategy adopted already in prior Finnish curriculum reforms (Tikkanen et al., 2017). This entailed fostering teacher agency through shared sense-making and the construction of a collective understanding. Successful sense-making turns reform goals into development work that is both meaningful for those involved and facilitates agency (Soini et al., 2017).

The influence of supra sites – global actors, such as OECD and EU – is strongly present in the contents of the current national curriculum (Soini et al., 2021). Finland integrated transversal competences into the National Core Curriculum, from pre-primary education to upper-secondary education. Competences – defined as knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and volition – do not replace disciplinary knowledge, but serve as dispositions beyond individual subjects and are the ultimate objectives of all subjects (FNBE, 2019). The goal of teaching transversal skills is accompanied by a requirement for integrated learning, allowing the study of broad-ranging topics crossing the subject boundaries (Niemelä & Tirri, 2018).

While the majority of teachers seem to agree with the goals of the curriculum, approve the basic ideas (values and learning goals) behind it and find it to be coherent, research involving over 900 teachers (e.g., Sullanmaa et al. 2019) suggests that the resources for the participatory implementation strategy and shared sense-making, especially in micro sites of curriculum making, have been insufficient. Also, the focus and orchestration of sense-making varied across different sites and the curriculum was perceived to be less coherent in micro sites than in macro policy. The inference to develop transversal competences through subject integration was not clear to many teachers, who considered subject integration as extra work with no real meaning. As a result, teachers have found it challenging to create integrated curriculum, as well as to introduce transversal competences into very subject-specific teaching and learning. Perceived ambiguity in goals weakened teachers’ sense of agency in micro sites of curriculum making (Soini et al., 2021).

Many schools ended up solving the challenge of integrated curriculum in the form of project weeks, while most of the teaching still followed division into traditional subjects. This then made it harder to view transversal competences as cross-cutting or as part of a shared educational vision for all teaching. Some schools, however, did succeed in developing original and meaningful approaches, managing, for example, to increase teacher collaboration, while maintaining what teachers considered to be crucial for subject matter teaching.

Curriculum making with a participatory implementation strategy, including shared sense-making, that aimed to enact profound changes to the micro site curriculum has proven to be very challenging. The intentional efforts towards participatory reform, for example by actively engaging

teachers to participate in meso sites of curriculum making, was not enough to support agency. Teachers would have needed more opportunities for shared sense-making to build a bridge between supra and macro discourses and micro site practice. It appears that shared sense-making happened in some pockets of micro sites, with limited movement of actors and ideas between sites and layers of the system. Moreover, engaging teachers in meso sites is not sufficient, or should take different forms to support strong teacher agency in curriculum making in schools. For example, capacity building and engagement seemed too focused on individual teachers, and teacher communities never reached the stage of shared sense-making in terms of transversal competences and subject integration. Teacher communities did not experience enough opportunities to develop holistic views of the curriculum and thus enhance their collective agency as curriculum makers.

Experiences from the reform show that shared understanding of *what*, of principles and big ideas, is not sufficient; there is a need for more discussion and shared sense-making in terms of *how* to turn large scale reform goals into development work that is meaningful and facilitates teacher agency. That would also help to adapt the reform goals initiated in supra and macro layers to fit better with the teachers' contexts and conditions in micro and nano sites of curriculum making. A socio-cognitive approach to policy implementation is a useful approach in understanding curriculum making as a process of interpretation and enactment across sites by multiple social actors. However, it is a demanding approach which requires resources: time allocation, financial and social resources, and capacity-building to develop skills and strategies of sense-making by all actors involved.

Teachers' curriculum making in classrooms and implications for students' access to knowledge in Sweden

The next vignette focuses on the ways in which the framing of national policy shapes curriculum making by teachers, potentially constraining teacher agency, but also provoking teachers' creative responses to contextual problems. In 2011, Sweden adopted a new curriculum for compulsory schooling. The new curriculum implied structural and substantive changes: standardized aims and goals, specified criteria regarding prescribed content and abilities (competences), and 'knowledge requirements' for assessment in each school subject (Alvunger, 2018). It rested on a neo-conservative view about the significance of academic disciplinary knowledge and technical-instrumental notions of prescriptive teaching. The Swedish National Agency for Education was responsible for implementing the reform, but due to the decentralized Swedish school system, it was the task of municipalities, as responsible authorities for the provision of schooling locally, to provide support and organize the enactment of the curriculum reform in schools. The municipalities often lacked capacity to launch competence development programs and ensure supportive resource allocation for teachers' curriculum making. These conditions had implications for the alignment of reform and resulted in local variations in micro sites (Alvunger & Wahlström, 2021).

Across different micro sites, teachers responded differently to the new curriculum. A general opinion was that there was an overload of content and time restraints, with implications for teacher agency; teachers struggled to keep abreast with assessment and grading, and the interpretation of aims, core content and knowledge requirements in the curriculum presented challenges (Alvunger, 2017). The new curriculum made teachers less inclined to accommodate students' questions and experiences in teaching (Adolfsson, 2018). The emphasis on assessment, grading, performance and results constrained both teacher agency and curriculum making in nano sites. Research shows that there was a tendency to conflate disciplinary knowledge content and a 'results and assessment' oriented discourse (Alvunger, 2022). Practical exercises were often justified based on the knowledge requirements (the students should 'show' what they can do), rather than being a foundation for exploration or extending towards other knowledge areas and school subjects. Altogether, this

hampered the creation of a relationship between the students' subjective world of experience and progressive scientific conceptual knowledge (Alvunger, 2021).

However, there were also signs of innovative approaches to curriculum making by teachers and an emerging interdisciplinary dimension in teaching. Teachers combined and 'patched' content together between curriculum tasks to deal with content crowding and time pressure (Alvunger, 2018). This move towards interdisciplinary knowledge areas and for collaboration in teachers' curriculum making was a way of seeking to achieve agency. Teachers worked collectively with 'pedagogical plans' to align aims, content and assessment criteria. In classroom interaction, this could be observed through teachers' epistemic transactions, moving between disciplinary systematic and progressive conceptual/theoretical knowledge to include concrete, social and everyday knowledge and thus appeal to students' subjective experience (Alvunger, 2021).

Classroom curriculum making is a process of interaction between students, teachers, teaching materials and the contextual setting in the classroom which shapes and constructs different meanings as knowledge is recontextualized (Alvunger et al., 2021). The focus on performance and prescribed standards tends to narrow the space in classroom teaching for using knowledge in a constructive, meaningful, and dialogical sense (Adolfsson, 2018). A challenge with high-performing and highly competitive students is that teachers sometimes need to divert the students' attention away from high grades and toward an understanding of the significance of learning and knowledge. This raises questions about how different teaching repertoires potentially can encourage systematic exploration and knowledge formation as well as creating a greater potential for student interactions, knowledge exchange, critical enquiries, discussions, and collaborations with joint meaning-making. For example, it could be argued that teachers' choice of group work and their organization of 'individual work' into smaller groups in messy classrooms provides access to 'powerful knowledge' (Young & Muller, 2015), compared to whole-class teaching (Alvunger, 2021).

The curriculum of 2011 was recently revised and updated in a 2022 version. The revisions aim at providing clearer guidelines and support for teachers' curriculum making and agency. The core content has a higher degree of concretion and progression, while grading criteria have replaced the knowledge requirements. The criteria are less detailed and open for teachers to move beyond just grades. These changes indicate that observations from empirical research and experiences from teachers' curriculum making at the micro and nano sites can find a way back to inform curriculum making at the macro site.

Performativity and curriculum making in Scottish secondary schools

In the final vignette, we focus on the backwash effect of national qualifications – and associated external demands for performance data – through which teachers and schools are measured and judged in a system where agency is limited by practical-evaluative constraints. The vignette draws primarily from recent research (Shapira et al, 2023), which explored patterns of curriculum making in Scottish secondary schools. Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), as an early archetype of the 'new curriculum' (Biesta & Priestley, 2013), seeks to provide a broad, competency-based education suited to the demands of the 21st century. The phased introduction of CfE in schools after 2010 was accompanied by changes to senior phase course qualifications (secondary school years S4 to S6 – i.e., ages 15-18). The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) sought to bring senior school qualifications into line with the principles and purposes of CfE, through the creation of new one-year courses linked to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework¹, essentially a ladder of

¹ <https://scqf.org.uk/>

qualifications, with the majority of students undertaking qualifications from levels 3-5 in S4, level 6 (Higher) in S5 and level 7 (Advanced Higher) in S6.

These reforms seem to have been ineffective in addressing the accountability-related issues that have traditionally driven Scottish secondary schooling. The OECD (2021) review of the curriculum noted a disjunction between the senior phase and the aspirations of CfE, encouraging performativity in secondary schools. Courses are characterized by cramming content and formulaic teaching to the test, often at the expense of teaching for understanding. Another widely discussed consequence has been curriculum narrowing in the early part of the senior phase. Under the previous qualifications' framework, it was usual for students to study eight subjects over two years (S3-4). Since the introduction of new qualifications in 2013, there has been a decrease in the number of subjects studied in S4 (in some schools as few as five), raising concerns about whether this constitutes a broad and balanced education. There has been a decline in enrolments in subjects such as Social Subjects, Expressive Arts and Modern Languages, compared to subjects seen as core (e.g., Maths and English). Moreover, there is evidence of social stratification in overall and subject entry patterns in S4, with a steeper decline (e.g., a narrower range of subjects) affecting students from comparatively disadvantaged areas. In turn, a narrow curriculum in S4 has been associated with delayed patterns of entry to subsequent qualifications, with consequences for transitions to further and higher education. The research points to a range of often dubious practices designed to maximize attainment statistics, including removing subjects with poor attainment from the curriculum (Shapira et al., 2023).

Backwash from the senior phase qualifications extends to curriculum making in the preceding Broad General Education (BGE) phase in years S1-3 (i.e., ages 11-14), intended as a foundational education stage of schooling. Recent research (OECD, 2021; Shapira et al., 2023) suggests that these goals are not being achieved. Survey data (Shapira et al., 2023) paint a picture of highly fragmented provision – typically students seeing 15-17 teachers in a week – with provision mirroring senior phase subjects. In some schools, there is evidence of early subject choice, with students being channelled into Senior Phase courses before the end of the formal BGE in S3. Schools reported seeing the BGE as largely an opportunity to prepare students to pass senior phase qualifications. Again, performativity is evident, for example the practice of obliging students to take subjects against their will – known variously as 'farming' or 'channelling' or 'assertive coursing' – if it is judged that this will lead to better attainment.

The survey indicates that for many schools, the significant influence on curriculum making is their perceived need to provide the right sort of data. Data, related to attainment and positive destinations, are highly influential in shaping decisions about curriculum design and provision in the majority of schools. This largely relates to meeting performance indicators and other externally specified measures of 'success', which can lead to instrumental decision-making (and the potential to undermine the educational aims of the curriculum). Conversely, the Four Capacities of CfE – the core purposes laid out in national curricular policy – seem to be at best only moderately influential in informing curriculum design in many schools as micro sites.

The qualitative data from the study by Shapira and colleagues (2023), generated via focus groups and school case studies, are highly illuminative in helping us to understand performative cultures in Scottish secondary schools, and their deleterious effects on curriculum making. Participants in the study presented a near unanimous view on this subject. Even senior figures in the system (such as local authority Directors of Education) complained that the demands of assessment in the senior phase wrongly dominate learning and teaching at all levels of secondary schools, inhibiting innovative curriculum making and encouraging conservative, safe practices.

It was widely noted that this situation is due to a relentless demand for data, for raised attainment and evidence of performance against various indicators and targets, with the potential for perverse incentives and widespread gaming of the system to produce the best possible attainment statistics. Evident throughout this vignette is a restriction of teachers' professional agency, as pressures emerging from an accountability culture constrain educational decision making, encouraging instead strategic compliance with policy and instrumental practices geared to raising attainment.

Discussion

In this chapter, we have examined various conditions and factors that influence teacher agency and curriculum making in different contexts. Collectively, the vignettes provide insights into how teacher agency might be facilitated or enabled, potentially fostering more meaningful micro and nano curriculum making by teachers. In the following, we briefly draw together the various strands that emerge from the vignettes and broader research, and consider these in relation to teacher agency and curriculum making.

First, it is evident that there are multiple conditions that shape the professional agency of teachers as curriculum makers, across all of the systems. Our vignettes illustrate that agency may be constricted in contexts where teachers lack access to meaningful and purposeful professional networks. As exemplified in the Welsh and Scottish cases in our first vignette, these networks are crucial for fostering teachers' reflexivity and critical engagement (see also Hizli Alkan, 2023b). However, agency can be truncated where such networks exist but lack diversity, meaning that relationships can also reinforce conformity, inhibit divergent thinking and perpetuate habitual practices. Conversely, diverse networks can interrupt such practices, providing a forum through which teachers gain rich experiences. This, in turn, influences how teachers exercise different forms of reflexivity, which can foster the formation of alternative visions for future practice (Hizli Alkan, 2023a). In the case of Finnish teachers – explored in the third vignette – it was clear that in contexts where teacher communities lacked opportunities for shared sense-making and capacity building, there was little room for teachers to exercise collective agency that gave way for holistic approaches to curriculum making. Therefore, we argue that policy makers and agencies must include space and consideration for teachers' relational working in the enactment of curriculum and new policy frameworks. This is necessary for challenging long-held beliefs, developing teachers' implicit theories of knowledge and practice and informing their dispositions towards their work. These are key issues which can enhance the agency of teachers as they engage with increasingly complex and often problematic contexts for action.

Second, we suggest that enabling teachers (traditionally involved only in nano and micro curriculum making) in activities across meso and macro sites, could develop their professional agency, leading to an increased capacity to make curriculum in all these sites. Examples are provided from Cyprus (the subject-area counsellor) in the second vignette and Wales (Pioneer Teachers) in the first vignette of systematic meso activity that subsequently facilitated substantial curriculum making by other teachers in schools and classrooms. The Cypriot case also illustrates the significance of historicization and generational patterns as part of the iterational dimension of teacher agency. As shown, the rolling out of a curriculum reform that was reshaped several times, amidst political debates, did not only put weight on teachers, but also created the conditions for various conflicting notions and understandings of teacher professionalism and the role of the teacher in relation to the curriculum to surface. At the same time, teachers' personal and professional stories, and their socio-political context (especially as materialized in the form of official textbooks or teaching materials, aligned or not to the new curriculum) had a considerable impact on their micro and nano curriculum making; further research has illustrated how teacher education curricula also play into these processes for decades in advance for different generations of teachers (Philippou & Kontovourki,

2023; see also Goodson & Mikser, 2023). Such findings are a stark reminder of how complex curriculum making and teacher agency are at their interplay (Priestley et al., 2023), despite the familiar political push for short-term curriculum policies as solutions.

Third, involvement of teachers at the meso site does not guarantee teacher agency or curriculum making, as shown in the vignettes from Sweden and Finland. The lack of support for teachers' curriculum making at the meso site in the early stages of the Swedish reform is similar to evidence presented in the Finnish vignette. This suggests that even teachers participating in many sites and layers of curriculum making will not self-evidently turn large scale reform goals into development work that is meaningful and facilitates teacher agency. However, the Swedish case in the fourth vignette also bears witness to how teachers developed strategies to cope with new assessment standards and a predefined corpus of content that created time constraint and a sense of an overloaded curriculum. Newly introduced templates for micro curriculum making, such as local pedagogic plans, turned out to be ways for enhancing possibilities for collective agency and finding pockets for interdisciplinary collaboration. The creation of spaces and allocated time for interaction is essential, but such prerequisites will in themselves not necessarily result in shared sense-making. This was clear in the example in the first vignette with the Welsh teacher who struggled with the resistance towards the new curriculum among colleagues. The ecological approach to teacher agency, which takes the cultural and relational dimensions into account, and the concept of reflexivity adds to our understanding of how agency – as an emergent phenomenon – may be hampered or achieved (Hizli Alkan & Priestley, 2019).

Fourth, the evidence presented in the vignettes point to the potential for accountability mechanisms to erode teacher agency and constrict curriculum making at the micro and nano sites. We believe that this is an essential take-away message for future policy making and the consideration of implementation schemes for curriculum reforms. The impact of accountability measures and instrumental curriculum practices are clearly evident in the Swedish and Scottish vignettes. These cases suggest that when teacher agency is heavily constrained – as teachers work in highly performative cultures – the results can be very tangible in terms of their micro and nano practices. For example, performativity culture often resulted in more homogenous and assessment-focused networks, limiting the scope for teacher agency and reproducing habitual practices to address mostly short-term performativity goals. There seems to be an amplified risk that practices of curriculum making at the micro and nano sites of activity become reduced to pre-defined and compartmentalized segments, which limit open critical enquiry and systematic exploration in classrooms. In this respect, the conceptual framework of curriculum making as social practice is helpful for identifying how ideas and discourses travel, move and transform across different sites of activity, with significant implications for the achievement of both teacher and student agency.

Finally, the vignettes underscore the significance of sense-making activities at different stages of curriculum reforms in shaping teacher agency. Sense-making is essential and has a direct link to the iterational as well as the projective temporal dimensions of teacher agency because it includes the possibility to imagine future scenarios and practical implications of a curriculum reform, while drawing on previous experiences of reforms and changes as a resource and scaffold for curriculum making. Once again, we underscore the importance of teacher networks or subject-area counsellors (mentors) as meso sites for sharing and reflecting on such experiences, to create conditions for teachers' sense-making and guidance for curriculum reform, as shown in our research on curriculum making (Alvunger et al., 2021). The vignettes from Finland, Scotland and Wales suggest that a more nuanced and relational understanding of meso support is crucial to enhance teacher agency through collective and shared sense-making processes. For example, a lack of sense-making activities at the early stages of curriculum reform may disable individuals' ability to take purposeful actions, pushing

them to exercise fractured reflexivity and restricting their agency. Conversely, active involvement in sense-making activities can lead to a more meaningful translation of macro curriculum policies in micro and nano sites.

The theorization of teacher agency and curriculum making presented in this chapter supports arguments for acknowledging teachers as curriculum makers. While this has been argued in the field for at least five decades (e.g., Schwab, 1973; Stenhouse, 1975), these vignettes further highlight how curriculum making occurs across sites and how teachers may contribute and benefit from such crossings between sites. The vignettes also show that there are no universal or quick fix policy solutions or templates of curriculum reform that can be rolled out without regard to the intricate ecology of school systems and their historicities, illustrating the value of viewing curriculum making as systemic practice and agency as ecological. The power of systemic thinking appears in how we are encouraged to address teacher agency at individual, structural and cultural levels together with the importance of strong networks, meso site capacity building and support, and the opportunities to work across sites. Viewing the curriculum as social practice, something that is made and enacted across different sites, helps us to look beyond a hollow rhetoric of school empowerment and to explore the conditions through which this may be achieved within each system.

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