Orbis scholae

VOL 18 / 3 / 2024

Critical Challenges for Curriculum Futures

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Charles University / Karolinum Press

ISSN 2336-3177 (Online)

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Critical Challenges for Curriculum Futures: Democracy and Education

While the concept of 'challenges' may seem somewhat trite in the context of educational scholarship today, and with no shortage of opinion on what the prime trials are for contemporary curricula, it is notable that we write this introduction in a time of right-wing conservative uprise and live genocide. The educational landscape we face as scholars interested in curriculum is now situated within an era marked by a series of convergences sketching new forms of injustices across multiple social planes. What lies at stake, and cannot be confined to a particular curricular level, is the very concept of democratic life, to borrow from Giroux (2025). Decades of neoliberalism and its evolving formations presents distinct yet interrelated dangers for curriculum, particularly concerning the shift to 'late' (McGimpsey, 2017) and 'authoritarian' (Saidel, 2023) neoliberal epochs – post the 2008 global financial crash – that mark one part of a convergence with the rebirth of a global (neo)fascism. Within this context anti-democratic movements have arisen coalescing under common ressentiments to the – albeit often unaware to these movements – violence and destruction of neoliberal capitalism for all peoples. As pointed out by Mondon and Winter (2020), the result is a broad level of resentment among, for example far-right activists, towards the very concept of liberal democracy and the associated gains pronounced under its post-World war and contemporary political milieu. In reactionary forms these movements adopt, often extreme, ethnonationalist positions centring their dissatisfactions on global minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, public institutions, academics, and more, within a sociopolitical era characterised by powerful right-wing individuals such as Trump and Orban. Furthermore, the notion of culture itself is unfolded as a 'technology' distracting masses from the 'cruel realities of economic stagnation and social inequality' (Giroux, 2025, n.p).

Within this bleak setting, education itself has become a target for the authoritarian neoliberal fascism of today. This is readily visible in Trump's second term as President of the United States, where he has launched vicious assaults on higher education and imposed legislative bans on the teaching of critical topics such as anti-racism and decolonial studies, clearly repressing the fulfilment of democratic

https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2025.5
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curricula. However, this is not confined to the United States and similar occurrences can be seen around Europe, such as in Hungary where a law has been passed banning the teaching of inclusive sex education (Chini, 2024) under a conservative movement led by Viktor Orban. We see in such actions how curriculum, broadly conceived in this editorial, is sensitive to these political forces resulting, in these exemplars, in the repression of official curricular inclusions. However, these are not new insights into the workings of curriculum, where some time ago writing in relation to policy, Stephen Ball situates the multifaceted nature of policy as encompassing multiple interpretations and spanning various material and symbolic strata (Ball, 1993). Curriculum, as a form of policy, therefore, is more than just official text or discourse but encompasses the 'messiness' of curriculum-making as social practice (Priestley & Philippou, 2018) and the manner in which these networked practices enter into power relations. Added to this sociality of curriculum, it also involves a totality of resources amassing scientific, intellectual, linguistic, discursive, textual, and cognitive resources (Luke et al., 2012) across official and unofficial channels. Importantly, drawing from Ball (1993), curricula encompass interventions into practice, thus signalling the importance of a broader network of actors including teachers and parents, and these of course pose problems to be solved in material contexts. Not only does this signal the importance of critical research into the *enactment* of curricula, but highlights the centrality of curricular interpretations and their attended discourses.

This all weaves complex networks or ecologies of curriculum and while it is easy, within liberal democratic contexts, to dismiss the conservative forces as vulgar aberrations and not worthy of scholarly analysis, we need to be mindful of the genuine disenfranchisement of many within the (neo)liberalist worldview (Kitching, 2024). This has implications for how curriculum studies is approached today, especially situated within the encirclement of global educational governance, where all forms of curricular policy are enmeshed within complex power relations (Ball, 2012). Curricula worldwide are often framed within such relations – sometimes exclusively – as servile to economic agendas and the international competitiveness of nation states and resulting in instrumental cultures of performativity, increased accountability, managerialism, and of note to the current anti-democratic turn, the depoliticization of education (Ball, 2000; De Lissovoy, 2015; Delahunty, 2024a; Kirwan & Hall, 2016; Lynch et al., 2012). These malformations of curriculum by neoliberalist forces have been bolstered by global testing regimes which have imputed new technologies of surveillance into education, strengthened further by datafication and governance by numbers (Ball, 2015; Selwyn & Gašević, 2020). However, this does not operate solely on curricula but also on the consequential subjectivities of those actors (students, teachers etc.) both forming and being formed by the coloniality of neoliberal governance (Delahunty, 2024b, 2024c). Precision education governance operates upon curriculum to effect a vision of the future, founded on the potentialities of student subjectivities; tomorrow's democratic polity. Within this global policy assemblage, organisations such as the OECD exert inordinate influence on curriculum-making

operating as a 'master of persuasion' (Bryan et al., 2024, p. 349) and concomitantly strengthened by broader forces such as 'algorithmic futuring' (Kitchin, 2023), global norm setting (Seitzer et al., 2023), the neuro-affective turn (Yliniva et al., 2024), and the ongoing scientism of evidence-based discourses for education (Delahunty, 2024a).

It is therefore essential that the response from the field of curriculum studies reflects a core concern for a democratic (re)turn premised on social justice within public education. Far from relegating debates about the centrality of knowledge to curriculum, as has been problematised (e.g., Priestley & Sinnema, 2014), this necessitates critical reflection upon 'powerful knowledge'. This is 'the official disciplinary curriculum, which is selected from socially and culturally bound knowledge systems' (Riddle et al., 2023, p. 137) and necessitates our reaffirmation of the politicalness of curriculum and its role in democratic efforts, particularly attuned to the disproportionate threat faced by minorities in our present era. As theorised by Paulo Freire, 'solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidary; it is a radical posture' (Freire, 1996, p. 23). Building on this notion of critical pedagogy, this issue stands for an invitation to reorient ourselves to a critical curriculum for (re)turning to democracy and therefore necessitates not only critique of official curricula and discourse, but attention to the textual and discursive interventions on practice, and a willingness to transcend orthodoxies of educational research. The collections of papers in this issue address these various concepts in different ways.

Taking the challenge of critique to task, Donovalová (2025) presents research charting the differences in official curricular representations of gender across several European contexts. This research demonstrates the complexity of curricular interpretations and the ways in which local manifestations of general liberal democratic notions of equality can capture very different conceptualisations of gender; some far more inclusive than others. This not only charts different political contexts and their curricular intentions, but also demonstrates some of the issues with a highly abstracted notion of equality entailed in the liberalist outlook. It must be emphasised that the more ideologically abstract framing of curricular policy, motivated by a more abstracted liberalist (mis)conception, the less the likelihood it will be enacted in meaningful forms in practice. To borrow from Ball (1993) once again, 'it meets other realities' (p. 13).

Dvořák and colleagues (2025) present their reflections on the European Educational Research Association Season School on Curriculum and Annual Conferences in 2024 Nicosia, Cyprus, 23rd–30th August 2024. These research conferences and season school curriculum spaces present opportunity for dialogue, debate and discussion. The curriculum conversations at the events centred around issues such as the drift of curriculum studies towards a broad perspective of cultural studies, which may have resulted in the neglect of practical issues of curriculum design through excessive theorising and politicisation of the field. Reading this paper you are reminded that curriculum text is as Lingard reminds us a (con) text 'a text made up of a range of other texts, related, similar, present, absent, actual, and virtual' (2021). It re-

flects what we want to preserve about the past, what we value in the present and our hopes for the future. Dvořák and colleagues remind us that 'a broad consensus in today's post-modern era is impossible. It is not possible to please everyone, but everyone's voice and expertise must be respected' linking back to the topic of this editorial and the need to reaffirm the link between curriculum and the purpose of education and its role in democratic efforts.

The speech given by Lucy Crehan on Policy Forum for Wales conference on curriculum in Spring 2024 is published in this volume. In her speech she reviews a range of recent evidence on curriculum reform, calling for Welsh Government to reconsider the role of knowledge in their new curriculum framework. Crehan (2024) reminds us that what you end up with if you don't deliberately plan a curriculum around progression in knowledge is isolated facts. She goes on to say that to think critically about a topic, or to be creative in a domain, you need to draw on connected webs of knowledge and understanding, which students need to build up over the course of the curriculum. If we are to respond to the critical challenges facing curriculum around democratic education, we need to work together in connected ways around these webs of knowledge. Curriculum provides space for young people to be challenged through critical pedagogy and to be opened up to the world and to the self (Biesta, 2021). Crehan's argument is of relevance to all countries undergoing curriculum revisions such as in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ireland and undoubtedly in other countries as well.

Lastly, through situating curricular discourses within the rise of anti-liberalist and anti-democratic evolutions, Delahunty and colleagues (2024) sketch the core implications for today's citizenship education landscape. Considering the importance of a responsive democratic turn in curriculum, as a means to counter some of these broader societal concerns, citizenship education is theorised as a critical space to open up to democratic potentials. This contribution highlights these core challenges and presents some thoughts on ways forward for curriculum research.

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Citizenship Education Curriculum Making for Troubled Times

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Abstrakt: The rise of far-right forces in Europe, the increase in the number of illiberal and autocratic regimes, and influence operations against European democracies call for a new role of citizenship education. While education policy has previously focused on issues of justice, inequality and inclusion, the focus of new far-right parties and governments is now on curriculum content and related cultural issues. In this article, we discuss the implications of changes in the European political landscape for citizenship curriculum making. We propose a research and development approach that connects two broad perspectives – curriculum studies and critical educational scholarship – and covers three areas: study of changing concepts of citizenship and education needs of young people; analysis of factors contributing to connections and disconnections between European and national policies in citizenship education; and new models of curriculum making at the meso-sites. The necessity for broader collaboration between researchers across disciplines and national contexts is highlighted, and the potential as well as limits of the proposed approach to curriculum making in the field of citizenship education are discussed.

Keywords: curriculum, curriculum making, citizenship education, democratic education, illiberalism, Europe

On the 24th of February 2022, with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world and in particular the European states entered new uncharted waters (Terry, 2023). But long before that, the last decades have seen the emergence, recrystallisation and increase of right-wing political beliefs across liberal democracies leading to – and further fomenting through – a series of global sociopolitical transformations such as, the global financial crisis of 2008–9, and its fall out; the United Kingdom's exit from the EU in 2020; or the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Latest in this series of events, and apparently crucial for further developments, has been Trump's

https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2025.6
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re-election in 2024. This shift has been linked to rightist discourses arguing for a return to nativist, sovereigntist, anti-liberal and even imperialist visions of the past veiled in the rhetoric of national identity or common-sense politics (Krzyżanowski et al., 2023; Mastrorocco, 2024; Wodak, 2021). Even though various parties may come to power in European and other traditional democracies in the coming years, such discourses will not disappear.

The impact of anti-democratic forces is sobering when one considers that the 2023 global Democracy Index recorded the lowest average score for democratic health in Europe, since its inception in 2006 (Economist Intelligence, 2024). Even in countries not directly affected by war (yet) and where the rule of law still exists, this period is characterised by an ever-increasing gulf between academic, policy and popular understandings of democracy and education. These developments disproportionally threaten the rights of minorities, migrants, LGBTQ+ people, and women, and contribute to social unrest amidst increasing inflation and inequality as well as falling standards of living within Europe (European Union, Eurostat, 2025).

These processes in different countries have somewhat different sources, forms and manifestations. Therefore, there is no generally accepted conceptualization and terminology yet, which is also reflected in our text (as one reviewer noted). We are talking about far right or populist forces, or processes of democratic backsliding that lead to the emergence of authoritarian or illiberal regimes. At the same time, some of the authors we refer to below emphasize other features or connections, to neo-conservatism, rise of oligarchy, but also to technolibertarianism (cyberlibertarianism).

The anti-democratic promise of challenging the status quo can be particularly attractive to some groups of youth whilst also being extremely deleterious to their socio-cultural, emotional and economic lives. Thus, education is critical to free society and particularly in promoting democratic qualities among young people (Snyder, 2024). The importance of citizenship education is recognised in European policy, by including, for instance, citizenship competence as one of the eight key competences for lifelong learning (European Commission, 2018) as well as in United Nations policy, such as through the principles of prosperity for all and fostering peaceful, just and inclusive societies enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 4 “Quality Education”.[1]

As citizens and academics, we are concerned about these phenomena and their implications for – and sometimes perhaps even their roots in – citizenship education. In this paper, we aim to outline a blueprint for research and development activities that could at least partially contribute to understanding and overcoming several challenges faced on a societal level and within the education system in particular, including:

[1] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/

- the ongoing standardisation of curricula through outcomes-based priorities,
- the nationalist inflection within the treatment of citizenship across European contexts,
- the restriction of curricula through banning of critical material such as that related to LGBTQ+ inclusion or anti-racism by neo-conservative politics, but also attempts by forces from the opposite end of the political spectrum to silence some legitimate dissenting opinions,
- the fragmentation of curriculum-making networks through the persistent exclusion of diverse voices/perspectives,
- the influences of misinformation and misuse of digital media,
- variations and concerning occurrences in student attitudes towards European democratic principles and emerging findings of youth radicalisation.

This list should be understood as provisional and will require further critical review, as the manifestations and impacts of shifts to the far right (or other forms of populism) and authoritarian rule are not uniform across countries. In the field of education, we believe that the response to these challenges requires deep understanding of the changing models of democracy, citizenship and complex political education needs of youth. At the same time, we need to explore how to develop policies and curricula through new models of practice.

Exactly because of this wide, multi-levelled and across different sites agenda presented in this paper, we adopt the term 'citizenship education' as a broader one to 'civic education'. Although they are often interchangeably used in public and academic discourse, we draw on Kerr (1999) and McLaughlin (1992) to consider them as lying at the ends of a broad continuum, respectively denoting 'maximal' as opposed to 'minimal' approaches to citizenship and citizenship education. More particularly, *civics education* has a restricted scope of citizenship and who can be included, also characterised by 'thin', content-led, information-based and teacher-centred approaches in mainly formal education programmes. *Citizenship education* lies at the 'maximal' end of this continuum, because it is more inclusive of diverse populations as citizens and denotes a 'thick' and broader range of progressive educational community and school activities which emphasise active participation and process rather than content.

1 Impact of Policy Shifts and Rise of Illiberal Forces on Education and Youth

In this section, we first recall that even in countries with liberal democratic governments committed to the values of European integration, citizenship education has often been implemented in national curricular documents in very different ways. Then, we focus on the influence of new domestic actors in European (educational) policy whose agenda is in direct conflict with the goals of democratic citizenship. Another key new factor is the unprecedented level of influence organized by illiberal

governments of third countries and the development of the technical means used to do so. Finally, we provide some information on youth citizenship attitudes and values and their changes which further document reasons for concern.

Democratic European countries have often been characterized by the dominance of an economic ideology within educational policy; this is not surprising given the economic rationalities often fuelling the expansion of modern school systems in previous decades. Neoliberal forces have reconfigured public education as an input to the economy (Antikainen, 2010; Ball, 2012; Robertson & Dale, 2015). These imperatives have resulted in crowded curricular and school programmes and a culture of high-stakes assessment across subjects in national curricula, restricting the time given to citizenship education and the resources devoted to the holistic development of citizens for contemporary Europe (Adolfsson & Alvunger, 2017). Even though all countries have been exposed to such forces at the supra-national site, there are still significant variances in the approaches to citizenship education across different European contexts. In fact, the report on the *Implementation of Citizenship Education Actions in the EU* has highlighted an overly strong focus on nationalist ideologies within citizenship education, informed by perspectives on national histories and culture, and economic ideology (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021).

Such variability in approaches towards citizenship education has so far been explained as a side effect of the emphasis on other curriculum domains, of the differential re-contextualisation of European and global citizenship discourses (Keating et al., 2009) or of challenges in relevant professional capacity on various sites where curriculum enactment, making or refraction occurs (Goodson & Mikser, 2023; Priestley & Philippou, 2018). Recently, however, in various European countries at the national or regional level, political entities have come to power that purposefully interfere with the citizenship curriculum, eliminate important goals for which there had been overall consensus and replace them with their own, strongly ideologically driven content. For instance, for decades, one priority issue of education policy by European governments, whether they were centre left-wing or centre right-wing, had been issues of equality, justice and inclusion, reflected in measures to change the structure of the education systems to more equitable and accessible forms. As far right and other populist forces increasingly influence (directly or indirectly) education policy, governments' priorities are changing. Cultural issues, not social ones, come first (Giudici et al., 2025).

The rise of anti-democratic forces and authoritarian governments is thus already changing curricular policies across the region, despite the above mentioned European and international policies for education. The frequency of direct interventions in the curriculum is increasing. For example, the Bulgarian government has recently banned content based on non-traditional sexual orientation in early years education (Dukovska & Zheleva, 2024). At the same time, conservative political forces in the United Kingdom are advocating for policy to curtail teaching about colonial history, racism and white privilege, arguing for the political neutrality of curriculum (Murray, 2020).

From a policy perspective, these discourses and reforms stand in contradiction to the principles of solidarity and of non-discriminatory education, as enshrined in the *Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Sustainable Development* (UNESCO, 2024). This not only works against the intent of European policy on citizenship education, but further risks eroding values of democracy among current and future generations of European citizens by, in the case of the examples given, restricting the curriculum through which they experience diversity and refusing to challenge antidemocratic ideology framed within a neoliberal 'depoliticization' of educational policy (Delahunty, 2024).

The erosion of EU values of solidarity and equality is notable beyond the policy or national curricular level. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022 – Damiani et al., 2024), for instance, has recorded generally positive attitudes towards the EU and being a citizen of Europe among lower secondary school students across several nations. However, there exists significant variation in these attitudes within individual European states, which also intersect with variables such as socioeconomic status (SES) and gender. In general, students from higher SES groups and those with higher levels of civic knowledge, demonstrated more positive attitudes to freedom of movement across the EU, with females representing a significantly higher proportion of agreement than males. Concerningly, 41% of students agreed that freedom of movement should be limited across the EU with students from low SES groupings demonstrating the highest values. While these findings support the importance of citizenship education, with it being positively correlated with more liberal attitudes to EU movement, this should be read against the widespread increases in students' observations of discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, poor people and those of African descent, respectively (Damiani et al., 2024, p. 40). These findings in particular indicate both the social increase in discrimination and students' vulnerability to such acts across Europe. Concerning evidence signals the emergence of youth radicalisation centred on racist/xenophobic and misogynistic ideologies (Reid & Valasik, 2018), along with increasing disconnections between researchers, policymakers, community and non-governmental bodies, parents, and teachers.

Moreover, we know very little about hostile information activities or strategic disinformation operations organized by various state and non-state actors (Legucka & Kupiecki, 2022), how they occur and what impact they have on youth and also on various actors in curriculum making. The evidence is rather anecdotal so far. For example, a long labour and criminal case was triggered when a Czech lower secondary teacher in April 2022, a few weeks after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, declared that the Russian actions were legitimate and denied very basic facts about the war during an eighth-grade class. The school and subsequently the judiciary handled the issue only when the students themselves published records of the lesson on social media. Moreover, various Czech authorities – educational administration and the courts – subsequently handled the teacher's and students' actions very differently (Bartosz, 2025).

It is clear from these brief snapshots of European policy and research that there exist mismatches in European and national educational policies and decisions, as well as incongruencies that distort the aims of citizenship education, including its aims in building solidarity and cultivating critical thinking among students (European Parliamentary Research Service; 2021).

Educational research, particularly in critical curriculum studies, has emphasised the impact of neoliberal economic ideology and its effects on limiting the scope of citizenship education for a long time (e.g., Shapira et al., 2023; Keddie, 2014; Zhao, 2020). There exists, however, a significant difficulty in the uptake of this research in curriculum and policy across Europe (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2020). Despite the proliferation of educational research in the last two decades, the transfer and mobilisation of the produced knowledge is limited and often fails to be integrated appropriately in areas such as curricular reform (OECD, 2022). Besides, Apple (2004, 2018) reminds us that the successes of far right forces in education can be explained to some extent by the fact that some progressive reforms were too utopian in their conception of teachers and students, did not offer a real alternative to traditional school, or did not care enough about creating the conditions for the realization of their visions in practice. Therefore, many people listen to the promises of education that combine romantically distorted images of the traditional home, family, and school with promises of a competitive workforce and greater discipline of students.

Altogether, these related issues may restrict the potential of appropriately addressing the rise of anti-democratic forces through citizenship curricula and pedagogy, undermining broader European policy and solidarity, and leading to continued social fragmentation, unrest, and violence, through a neglect of the political needs of students. We are aware that education alone cannot solve all the challenges facing European societies in this or any area. Moreover, formal curricular frameworks are only one factor influencing the form and effects of teaching and learning (Bernstein 1990/2003, 1996/2000; Polikoff, 2021). Therefore, in the following section, we briefly present a broader concept of curriculum, which we have selected as the foundation for our further considerations and suggestions.

2 Current Understanding of “Curriculum”

As visions for the world are not uniformly shared by societies, curriculum has historically been contested, shaped by dominant curriculum ideologies and amalgamations of them. Different people in different contexts provide different answers as to what any society should aspire to through its education and schooling, therefore also ascribing different meanings to the term ‘curriculum’. As Gordon (1988) put it ‘education functions, at least in secular societies, as a text that says something about the things society considers sacred’ (p. 446). Drawing on critical scholarship in education we thus understand curriculum not “simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge” (Apple, 1993), instead viewing it as inherently ideological and political.

Moreover, curriculum theorists have long insisted that curriculum is not reducible to the consensus or uniformity its manifestation as state-national official documents might suggest; rather curriculum is shaped at different administrative levels within education systems, such as the 'supra, macro, meso, micro, nano' levels (referring to the international, national, school, classroom and individual level respectively) (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009).

Expanding on these approaches, curriculum may be understood as a social practice enacted within and between different sites of activity, that is, as "multi-layered social practices, including infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated" (Priestley, 2019, p. 8). Thus, curriculum is a public project that is both made by social actors across multiple local, national and international spaces, reflecting as well as impacting individuals, communities and societies, while also holding potential to shape the world (Dempsey, 2023). This is a significant departure from the current standard in the field, which tends to focus on singular notions of curriculum as 'products' such as syllabi, teaching materials or official documents rather than the social and material, meaning-making processes through which those are produced and which involve relevant social activity by numerous actors. As Priestley and Philippou (2018) note, theorising curriculum making as social practice involves understanding it as occurring "across multiple sites, in interaction and intersection with one another, in often unpredictable and context-specific ways, producing unique social practices, in constant and complex interplay, wherein power flows in non-linear ways, thus blurring boundaries between these multiple sites" (p. 154).

This lens allows us to research curriculum as something that is created, or more aptly, 'made' and 're-made' simultaneously by numerous actors such as policy makers, agencies, school leaders, teachers across multiple layers or sites of education systems (rather than hierarchical administrative levels). A suggested typology has thus put forth the idea of such sites to include regional and international bodies producing transnational curriculum discourse (supra-site); national, state and governmental agencies producing curriculum policy and legal frameworks (macro-site); national and non-governmental, private publishers and curriculum agencies producing guidance and support for curriculum leadership (meso-site); schools designing curricula for their own context (micro-site) and pedagogic interactions as curriculum events within and beyond school classrooms between teachers and pupils/learners (nano-site) (Alvunger et al., 2021). This typology of curriculum making as occurring within and between these sites should not be viewed as a hierarchy of distinct levels, but rather as a heuristic tool for analysing curriculum-making from a plural publics perspective – whether inside-out, bottom-up, or top-down – highlighting the multi-directional flows of influence, information, materials and activity among these spaces.

As the changing landscape of educational politics and policy and the increasing number of illiberal regimes in Europe presents challenges and threats to citizenship education, relevant curricular scholarship seems necessary. The curriculum making

typology (and other curriculum theories) have often been suggested as ways of understanding general educational and curriculum phenomena. In this paper we call attention to the specifics of the development and implementation of programmatic curricula for specific educational domains or school subjects, whether in traditional democracies or in transforming countries. We also discuss some insights as to how some traditional problems and dilemmas of the curriculum manifest in the field of citizenship education, such as the debates between a focus on general capabilities (key competencies or soft skills) vs. subject-specific knowledge as well as between teacher agency and autonomy in curriculum making, to name a few.

3 Issues in Curriculum Research and Development

In this section, we present our vision of a research and development programme which could contribute to addressing some of the challenges and constraints we have identified in the first part of the paper on citizenship education in Europe. It includes three main components: 1. Clarification of the changing concepts of democracy and citizenship in contemporary social sciences, as well as the situation and needs of young people in the field of citizenship education. 2. Analysis of the factors that contribute to the variability of approaches to curriculum implementation in different European education systems, and of new risks that may constrain or deform the citizenship education. 3. Review and elaboration of models of curriculum making which would better suit the current social situation, the legitimate interests, concerns and needs of different actors, and which would thus be more likely to fuel desired changes both in the processes and in the outcomes of citizenship education. Each of these components is further unpacked below.

3.1 Changing Models of Citizenship and Political Education Needs of Young People

Various approaches to curriculum – from founding works of Bobbitt and Tyler to Bruner in North America to the German model of didactic reconstruction to the most recent curriculum design coherence model (Rata, 2021) – consider as the starting points for curriculum development the analysis of both the present and future *needs* of youth and/or of the current state of the corresponding academic *disciplines*. To offer novel pedagogical guidance and resources, it is essential to explore and map the complex changing models of democracy, citizenship education, and the political needs of youth, examined, for example, by numerous authors (e.g. Brezicha et al., 2023; Brezicha & Mitra, 2019; Campbell, 2019; Fozdar & Martin, 2020; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This objective calls for establishing a state-of-the-art knowledge base relating to the impact of societal anti-democratic occurrences and discourses on European publics, in particular on students, policy actors and curriculum makers (e.g., parents and teachers), across different educational levels (from primary

to higher education and lifelong learning) and spaces (e.g., formal and informal sites).

While policy by European bodies (e.g. EU, Council of Europe) and national governments are rhetorically clear on the role of education in promoting democratic citizenship, there is a notable dearth in knowledge on students' evolving conceptions of democracy and citizenship as shaped through the interaction of educational and sociopolitical spaces. Taking the evolving and fluid characteristics of democracy (Mouffe, 2005) as a premise, we suggest that establishing suitable approaches to gather data will inform broader initiatives to develop up to date databases of students' changing citizenship needs.

Such state-of-the-art knowledge base that gathers and interrogates student beliefs and attitudes in relation to these broader political trends could be useful for all social actors across all sites of curriculum making, including teachers and parents. Such knowledge could be available 'close to practice' and provide adaptive conceptualisations and approaches to students' everyday democratic citizenship needs in the context of contemporary societies, locally and more broadly.

Given pressing issues with the participation of migrants across European countries, worsened through right-wing hostilities and violence, educational sites such as '[s]chools have the potential to be real hubs of integration for children and their families', as stated by the European Commission (2021). At the same time, anti-democratic forces operate across various societal dimensions and influence individuals in both formal and informal educational sites; research on issues such as: misogyny in far-right influencers; the situational experiences of professionals in informal curricular spaces; and the position of minority parents and children within citizenship curricula are significant topics to investigate. To achieve such intersectoral and intersectional expertise to build such innovations in educational policy, critical to supporting wide participation, the boundaries of disciplinary approaches to research would need to be expanded in order to generate new ways of both researching and 'doing' policy. Methods from feminist media/internet studies (netnography, online discourse analysis), sociology (interviews, ethnography) and curriculum studies (case studies, historical analysis) could further contribute to the conduct of research envisioned in this paper.

Curriculum making also requires a thorough understanding of fundamental concepts in the corresponding academic disciplines. However, studies of citizenship education rarely acknowledge that democracy involves productive forms of dissensus amongst contested, unchosen publics (as distinct from the destructive forces of right-wing populism and authoritarianism). As Chantal Mouffe (2005) describes, this also entails wrestling with the tension implicit in a liberal democratic focus on individualised market freedoms on the one hand and a homogenous 'common good' on the other. This tension is visible within educational curricula which emphasise economic competitiveness for both the national and individual good, framed within an over-psychologised understanding of citizenship and subjectivity (Delahunty, 2024). However, the conception of the common good as structured by free-market

principles is clearly inadequate when considering the sociopolitical tensions and fractions in today's broader European society. Therefore, a plural vision of democratic education that necessitates diverging opinions, attitudes, and goals is needed, and hence we suggest using the outlook of Mouffe's (2005) *agonistic pluralism***.** This marks a significant departure from the present state-of-the-art in global citizenship education research, which, despite an often-interdisciplinary strategy, tends to fall short of engaging *intersectional perspectives* that allow meaningful understanding of the struggles of different communities (De Vries, 2020).

Finally, available scholarship understandably discussed the ways in which education can strengthen the democratic order and respond to negative and dangerous phenomena that threaten not only individual nations, but also the open, rules-based *international order*. This pre-emptive approach is the preferred path, of course, which corresponds to developments in the management of other types of risks (e.g. natural disasters), but we must not close our eyes to dark scenarios in case negative developments cannot be prevented. How can and should we educate young people who may soon live under the regime that restricts basic democratic rights and freedoms and distorts truth, suppressing and punishing even elementary resistance? What can we recommend to teachers who are already educating for citizenship under illiberal government? Researchers from Western countries have long been reflecting on the limitations that neoliberal governance brings to academic life and work as well as to lives and educational trajectories of young people. However, Holford et al. (2020) points out that such experience is only a "small bear" compared to the conditions for research and teaching citizenship education in regimes that are illiberal or authoritarian (Dvořák & Vyhnálek, 2015). The problem of whether and how we can prepare current students (as well as teachers and researchers) for the possible future of illiberal governments in their countries or regions remains largely unaddressed in educational theory and curriculum design and raises further questions. One of them is the question of whether and at what cost it will then be possible to maintain the freedom of educational activities, research or the development of curricular materials, and what alternatives there will be for young people and those who want to educate them.

3.2 Disconnections Between European and National Policies in Citizenship Education and Factors that Contribute to Them

Next, we suggest systematizing and extending our knowledge of the factors contributing to connections and disconnections between European and national policies and curricula in citizenship education.

European bodies had produced several research reports on the differential treatment and approaches to the inclusion of citizenship education in official curricula at policy and programmatic levels (Council of Europe, 2018; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2021). While European policy advocates for a focus on citizenship education to inculcate values supporting solidarity and interculturalism, there are

incongruencies when looking at its implementation in different national contexts. E.g., Donovalová (2024) very aptly shows how the implementation of gender equality topics in four European countries – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland and Sweden – differs at the level of national curriculum frameworks. Another notable trend is the nationalistic theme which characterises numerous examples of citizenship curricula and which may be restricting the full realisation of a European vision of democratic citizenship (e.g. Philippou, 2009). Incoherences exist not only between different levels and sites of curriculum making. Dvořáková and Lánský (2023) demonstrated, using the example of Czech curricular frameworks for citizenship education that within one curricular document, learning outcomes can be aligned with supra-national European policies, while the subject matter (content) listed in the same document adheres to traditional and outdated nationalist concepts.

Curriculum policy learning requires a variety of skills, knowledge, and expertise, and if these are not available or deficient, the capacity for member-states to implement European or United Nations recommendations and guidelines (generally or in the curriculum area) is challenged. Moreover, with the growth of disinformation, society has become increasingly sceptical of the value of governmental policies, especially when there is no apparent improvement in individuals' welfare (Hearn, 2023). The European Commission (2015) established the EU's Better Regulation (BR) agenda in 2015 to improve policy making and implementation. However, problems in implementation persist. To explore these challenges, it will be possible to draw on new institutionalism (Meyer, 2010; Wiseman et al., 2014), systemic or sociohistorical theory (Schriewer, 2012) and the policy borrowing approach (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2104, 2025). Similarly, it is possible to mobilize the concept of the 'refraction' of policies between sites (Goodson & Mikser, 2023). In previous decades, curricular research emphasized conditions for the active involvement of teachers in curriculum making (e.g., Pieters et al., 2019), far less studies however addressed capacity building needed at the macro and meso sites for national frameworks development and what support structures and institutions should be established (Dvořák, 2023). These and other general theoretical approaches require new empirical research that would show their applicability or limits both in the field of citizenship education and in the era of post-truth politics and/or illiberal players and regimes.

The current sociopolitical climate across Europe points towards the value of a coherent alignment of European and national approaches to citizenship education. It is therefore necessary to map the different forces operating in the socially situated practices of policy and curriculum making, taking into account the specifics of social sciences and citizenship education, across different educational sites (e.g. formal school, informal youth clubs) and levels (e.g. post-primary and higher education) through comprehensive literature reviews, critical policy analyses and empirical case studies. We consider this crucial to uncovering the topology of anti-democratic threats operating through material, symbolic, institutional and political forces, and their topologies, in order to deconstruct and reimagine citizenship education needs.

Elaboration of the necessary knowledge calls for robust investigating and analysis on intersections of educational policy and curricula with broader social forces operating within the varied topologies of plural publics. Methods and data sources from curriculum studies (e.g. documentary analysis, focus groups), sociology (e.g. critical policy analyses), media/internet studies (online content analysis), and political science (historical analyses) need to be combined to promote a greater understanding of the ways in which policy and curricula intersect and evolve in relation with broader social events and forces in a range of different areas including: interpretation and adaptation of policy/curricula impacted by anti-democratic forces at local sites, the impact of mainstreaming right-wing discourses on policy-actors beliefs and student perceptions of citizenship in light of policy evolutions, the ways political forces reform curricula and policy to 'silence' minorities, the connection and divergence of citizenship policy across European spaces, and understanding the connection of past-present sociohistorical spaces in the evolution to the neoliberal present in education. Particular involvement of gender (e.g., gender differences in citizenship needs), ethnicity, social class, sexuality (e.g., attitudes towards sexuality education) should be considered as appropriate, thereby connecting individual and situated experiences to broader societal power structures.

Of course, there are numerous objections within the EU that supranational organizations are exceeding the mandate given to them if they use their influence in this domain, stressing the right of member-states to determine their own goals and content in the field of general education, and even more so in citizenship education. As researchers and educationalists, we are not neutral here and believe that it is precisely in our time that the European project, including its value component, is proving its necessity and irreplaceability, since it is currently faced with internal and external threats to liberal democracy. However, this does not mean that we consider it flawless and unchangeable. On the contrary, research such as that envisioned in this paper will shed light and take into account the further development of the relationship between individual countries and the European Union and contribute to the ongoing discussions on rethinking its identity, mission and mechanisms of operation.

3.3 New Models of Curriculum Work

Understanding key current concepts of social sciences related to democracy and citizenship, the beliefs and needs of young people, and the reasons for limited success of curricular policies to date is a prerequisite for developing new models of curriculum making which focus on agonistic pluralism. This objective works directly on the issue of the fragmentation within the current situation of policy and curriculum-making across different European sites. Not only has the divide between educational policy and research been a persistent academic issue, but the divide between policy stakeholders has been raised as a critical issue working against European aims, such as the integration of migrant citizens in different national contexts. This objective

also bears in mind the current wave of right-wing anti-minorities sentiment and anti-immigrant protests across multiple European nations and intends to develop new models of policy and curriculum-making practices that 'step up action and bring together actors at all levels … to achieve integration and inclusion and to ultimately build more cohesive and inclusive societies', as advocated by the European Commission (2020, p. 20). This stream of action will address the lack of multi-stakeholder models of educational policymaking built on a concept of plural education publics, while simultaneously achieving new ways of curriculum making as specific case of doing policy to address the challenges identified in the academic literature.

Many and complex threats permeate and impact curriculum, including how they foment dissensus amongst minoritised groups on matters such as sexuality and gender education (Kitching, 2022). The concept of agonistic pluralism is engaged here to think about the ways dissensus and passionate commitments amongst communities can be recognised and engaged productively rather than to inflame divisions (Mouffe, 1999). The question of inclusion in a plural sense is to be probed, as it can generate new plural conceptions of curriculum making praxis that bring together a wider representation of global citizens, capable of contributing to a democratic citizenship education.

Research approaches and methods that can contribute to achieving this goal should combine elements from curriculum studies (case studies, design-based research) with educational anthropology (observational approaches, interviews) to explore and understand models of policy and curriculum making to promote plural democratic values and diversity, directly developing new approaches to working in these areas. Achieving this objective will require research to understand emerging professional and learner subjectivities at the intersection of citizenship education with other domains and sites of curriculum; examining the feasibility and efficacy of partnership models of curriculum making, including methods to enhance the inclusion of student voice; emphasising the development of mindful global citizens; and connecting practice and policy for plural curriculum design. It will call for a "regenerative and reflexive cultural policy response" to how we develop and make curriculum for democratic citizenship education (Figueira & Fullman, 2025). Resisting a further narrowing of educational purposes by neoliberal economic ideology, which emphasises individual competitiveness and standardised assessment, we suggest relational pluralism, which can only rest on agonism. However, it is also necessary to explore other scenarios that are not just a simple extrapolation of existing neoliberalism but reflect new forms of authoritarianism. This can shift the resulting curricula significantly beyond neoliberal conceptions of multiculturalism as managing 'good' and 'bad' diversity, a framing which degrades the rich potential an acknowledgement of the pluralities of experiences may produce (Lentin & Titley, 2011).

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The rise of far right and populist forces and the increasing number of countries with authoritarian regimes in Europe and beyond requires reflection and action from us as citizens and researchers. Unsurprisingly, the curriculum is becoming a key battleground. Curricular research as briefly outlined in this paper could contribute to addressing anti-democratic challenges by focusing on a comprehensive understanding of the diverse intersections of education and anti-democratic forces, across several levels and contexts. At the same time, it is also necessary to explore new ways of approaching policy and curriculum-making faithful to the ideal of a democratic Europe to bridge the widening gap between academic and public/political debates and decisions in education and communities.

In this paper, we presented a vision and research program that calls for bringing together scholars from social sciences with curriculum experts to address the complex contemporary challenges citizenship education is presented with. Plural identities of scholars coming from different academic fields, but also from various national contexts with different models of curriculum development and education organization, complement and contrast to devise approaches that transcend orthodox academic boundaries; bridge understandings with an increased array of policy-actors across various educational contexts; and devise new models of curriculum and policy-making praxis to inform a citizenship education for modern, plural publics in Europe. The present challenges require also overcoming the existing division of Europe into the West and East, which can be considered as a specific form of post-colonialism (Kalmar, 2022); this is why drawing on the experience and reflection of researchers from both parts of the continent is important. Such an endeavour has the potential to not only contribute to academic innovation in critical theory and curriculum studies, but also to concomitantly innovate in terms of policy suggestions, practices and pedagogy.

As stated above, it is clear that neither citizenship education nor the school as a whole can solve the problems facing young people in Europe today, since these often have deep structural roots. Further research is needed that goes beyond intended curricula and explores their implementation in schools and classrooms, including their influence on students (Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Despite that, curricula even in their programmatic form retain an important position as they are, ideally, here "to communicate the essential principles and features of an educational proposal in such a form that it is open to critical scrutiny and capable of effective translation into practice" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 4). That is why one way to challenge present threats to citizenship education is focusing on the social practices and actors that constitute contemporary curriculum-making, aiming to understand the interactions and intersections of curriculum spaces with the broader social movements and policies comprising the fractious sociopolitical climate of today. Here, the educational research in general and curriculum studies in particular can impact current and future policy and practice through both the empirical insights developed, and through

new models of curriculum-making based on plural-public approaches at national and European sites. For such complex ways forward to come into fruition we consider necessary to cultivate partnerships between two broad domains – curriculum and critical educational scholarship. This combination can also help reflect on the weaknesses that academic production in both areas has suffered from so far and which have contributed to its unsatisfactory impact on school practice. We hope to address the gap in academic research that has revealed the necessity to reaffirm educational spaces as political, to conceive of new approaches to policy and curriculum-making, framed with a broad systemic view which remains cognisant of the complex intersectional and social nature of curriculum (Bryan et al., 2024; Kitching, 2024; Priestley & Philippou, 2020). In troubled times, we want to be optimistic about education, but we cannot afford to be romantic (Apple, 2018).

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Gender in the Curriculum: Analysis of National Curricular Documents of Czechia, Estonia, Ireland, and Sweden

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Abstract: Currently, equality is one of the most debated topics in education and in the process of national curriculum revisions. Drawing on policy borrowing theory, this study examines how global trends on gender issues are integrated into the national curricular documents of four countries: Czechia, Estonia, Ireland, and Sweden. Using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis, the study explores how gender issues are embedded in the curricular documents and creates categories to help map their presence within the curricular documents, as well as frequency analysis to allow comparison and more detailed presentation of the data. The findings reveal notable differences. Sweden's curriculum addresses gender issues comprehensively and in considerable detail. Ireland shows moderate integration of gender issues, setting them mostly within the broader context of equality. Estonia represents a concentrated approach, with gender issues primarily integrated within only a few subjects; however, they are listed with a similar degree of specificity as in Ireland. Czechia, in contrast, lags significantly behind the other nations, with minimal attention to gender issues. The study fills a gap in the research that deals with gender issues in the curriculum. The developed categories provide a framework for analysing different curricular documents, offering valuable insights for future revisions.

Keywords: gender, gender equality, education, curriculum, document analysis

Gender issues influence the entire educational process (Krišová, 2019). They begin at the systemic level with the organisation of education (Taylor, 2013) and the composition of teaching staff (Colvin et al., 2019; Lassibille & Navarro Gómez, 2020). These and other factors shape the school environment and climate (La Salle et al., 2021;) and can affect communication within the school (Kilby, 2023; Vaďurová, 2011). Gender issues come through in the content of education (Kerkhoven et al., 2016; Lee, 2018) and should be reflected in the methods and forms of teaching employed (Gluzman et al., 2020; Namaziandost & Çakmak, 2020). They contribute to different expectations of students (Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2018; Sneyers et al., 2020) and affect the composition of students in individual classes (Gaer et al., 2004) as well as in specific areas of study (Jarkovská et al., 2010). These issues lead to differences in the evaluation of students (Münich & Protivínský, 2022) and can result

https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2025.3
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in disparities in school results (Oakley et al., 2024; Levine et al., 2019). It is important that education reflects these influences, and that gender topics and issues are presented, debated, and understood as part of the educational process.

Taking into account and integrating the gender dimension into the content of education is one of the priorities of the European Research Area (ERA) (European Commission, 2020a) and while it focuses mostly on higher education, the effort is relevant to all levels of education. It is also part of gender mainstreaming, which includes the integration of the gender perspective and gender dimension into the entire process of education (preparation, implementation, evaluation) (Krišová, 2019). During implementation of these educational priorities and policies from a global (or supranational) level to a local (national) level, the policies usually go through changes that adapt them to local political, cultural and economic conditions. Implementation of policies connected to gender is linked to willingness of different actors to promote this topic (Unterhalter & Northcote, 2018).

This study analyses national curricular documents from four countries: Czechia, Estonia, Ireland and Sweden. For the selection of these countries the Gender Equality Index (GEI), "a tool to measure the progress of gender equality in the EU" (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.-b), was mainly used. The GEI measures not only the overall level of gender equality in the country, but also its level in six core domains, one of which is Knowledge, which covers education. The GEI is viewed as a reliable and scientific source of data (European Commission, 2020b). The selected countries score across the GEI ranging from the best to the worst, as such an approach has the potential to include more diverse attitudes to integrating the topics of gender and gender equality into the curricular documents.

The different attitude of the countries towards gender issues may be reflected in the way they adapt them in the educational policies and practices. To interpret how global emphasis on gender equality translates into local curricular frameworks, this study adopts policy borrowing theory (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014), emphasising how international educational directives are received and recontextualised by national actors. By examining curricular documents through the lens of policy borrowing, this article seeks to illustrate how supranational gender norms are integrated in each country's official curriculum.

The analyses of the current situation of gender issues and their inclusion in the national curricular documents can inspire the future revision of national curricula. It also contributes to the adoption of the topic into school-level curricula through the comparison of the documents from different countries and can identify possible next steps in the inclusion of this topic.

This study aims to answer these research questions:

1) How do national curricular documents conceptualise and address gender and gender equality issues? What categories and classification emerge from analysing the curricular documents?
2) How do the selected curricular documents compare to each other in the context of gender and gender equality issues?

1 Gender Equality in the Curriculum

According to Jarkovská and Lišková (2008), research on gender issues in education can be categorised into three areas: research focusing on the influence of education on society and vice versa, as well as the impact on the school system, societal structures and inequalities; research examining relationships and interactions within the classroom; and research addressing educational content. The third area encompasses research on inequalities in the curriculum, such as textbooks, the language used and syllabi.

This study analyses curricular documents developed at the national level (Dvořák, 2012). Gender and gender equality topics can be introduced in schools through the intended curriculum expressed in official national curricular documents. This study relies on Lawton's (1975) concept of the curriculum as a selection from culture and society, in which not everything can be included, and employs the theory of policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012) as its theoretical framework.

Policy borrowing explores the interplay between global educational trends (e.g., focus on gender equality and other aspects of gender issues in education – OECD, 2022) and their adaptation to local contexts. The theory of policy borrowing and lending explores the process of transfer of educational policies across borders and their adoptions within local contexts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). This process involves "reception and translation", where global trends are interpreted through the lens of national priorities and sociocultural dynamics (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Part of the process is also the selection of parts of policies that resonate with local discourse (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). As some of the global or supranational policies become priorities, some countries may commit to them rhetorically, but not implement them in actual practise, which creates a discrepancy in policies and practices (Unterhalter & Northcote, 2018). Applying this framework to gender equality in curricula, the study investigates how international discourses on integrating gender into curricula are reflected and adapted in the educational policies of the selected countries and aims to uncover how global educational trends concerning gender are reshaped within diverse national contexts.

Elwood (2016) looked at the relationship between a curriculum and gender from a broader perspective, explaining that curriculum is not "neutral"; quite the opposite – it contains inequalities that affect educational experience. She suggested considering the cultural and social contexts and structures of both gender and the curriculum and taking these into account within the curriculum to create a more effective learning experience.

Integrating a gender perspective not only leads towards real changes when it comes to its effects on students but also increases awareness of the conveying of curricular knowledge (Palmén et al., 2020). For example, a gender-sensitive curriculum, i.e., a curriculum which integrates perspectives and examples of people of all genders as well as integrates gender issues within its content, "can enhance the cultivation of knowledge, skills and values" (Manchenko et al., 2022, p. 6049).

Transforming educational policies and societal discourses connected to gender issues is not an easy process. The integration of gender issues into the curriculum faces much resistance, not only externally but also within schools. Teaching staff sometimes perceive these issues as trivial and feel that their integration into the curriculum will not have any effect and that gender issues are not relevant to their field of expertise (Verge et al., 2018).

Looking specifically at curricular documents, a comparative study of three European countries (Austria, Hungary and Czechia), which analysed gender in curricular documents in the context of legislative and strategic documents dealing with education, presents the first results of such analysis in the European context. The study performed a critical examination of if and how the curricula of the selected countries follow the country's policies and if it integrates gender issues within the curricula. The attitudes of the three countries varied significantly, and the study shows that the policies often do not correspond with the form of the curricular documents, highlighting prevailing inequalities in education in all three countries (Krišová, 2019; Rédai & Sáfrány, 2019).

While gender topics and gender equality issues in education are covered quite heavily in academic literature, less attention has been paid to systematic research on gender issues in curricular documents. The focus is mostly on analysing textbooks and other educational materials (Çela, 2016; Sadeghi & Maleki, 2016), or the curriculum in the broader sense of a study programme (Dvořák, 2012), in the context of integrating gender issues (Banegas et al., 2020; Gaida et al., 2020). More comprehensive research and analysis of different curricular documents could help not only to further research on gender equality in education, but also to support different actors in education when designing and implementing curricular documents.

The position of this study falls on the premise that education systems benefit from explicit attention to gender issues, which corresponds with feminist and critical policy perspectives (Marshall, 2018). The interpretation of the results reflects an assumption that addressing gender roles, stereotypes and inequalities is necessary for fostering inclusive learning environments.

2 Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods methodological approach that allows a complex understanding of a phenomenon, provides additional perspective and allows for comparison (Doyle et al., 2016). The type of the research is document analysis, which involves skimming, reading and interpreting documents (national curricular documents) to yield data and insights. It provides background information and context, identifies key issues and supplements other research methods (Bowen, 2009). After setting criteria for document selection, the documents were collected, and key areas of analysis were formulated before the process of coding and analysis (Wach & Ward, 2013). In this study, quantitative and qualitative content analysis was used

to present both comparable quantitative data and in-depth qualitative analysis. The qualitative content analysis was employed to make replicable and valid inferences by interpreting and coding textual material (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), allowing for the analyses of the documents in the context of terms or phrases that were used to present and describe gender issues and equality issues in the documents. The instances of gender issues were categorised in order to understand how they can be integrated (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). In addition to the qualitative analysis, frequency analysis was employed to quantify the number of occurrences of specific gender-related terms and phrases within the curricular documents (Neuendorf, 2002) to formulate statistical results of the analysis to better map out the occurrences and to allow for the comparison of the chosen documents (Franzosi, 2008). All instances of gender issues were coded on the same level (see chapter 2.3 Data analysis). This provided a measure of how often gender issues were explicitly mentioned, helping to reveal differences in how each country addresses these topics and to compare the curricular documents with each other. This step provided quantitative data to complement the qualitative data.

2.1 Data Selection

Purposive sampling was used when selecting the documents to be studied, which provides for a selection of cases because of the specific qualities that it possesses (Etikan, 2016). The hypothesis, based on previous research, was that countries with different levels of gender equality measured by the Gender Equality Index (GEI) would also approach curriculum development differently. Furthermore, two practical criteria were added. Thus, the criteria for the selection of the national curricular documents were the following:

a) placement of the country of origin at different positions across the whole Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023),
b) availability of an official English translation,
c) full-text format with open access.

Four countries were selected based on these criteria. According to the GEI by the European Institute for Gender Equality (2023), Czechia ranks 25th overall (third from the bottom) with a score of 57.9 and ranks 16th in the Knowledge domain (i.e., the domain encompassing education), presenting the biggest difference between its overall score and its score in the Knowledge domain. Estonia appears in the lower half of the index, ranking 22nd overall with a score of 60.2 and ranking 22nd in the Knowledge domain. Ireland ranks ninth overall with a score of 73 and ranks sixth in the Knowledge domain. Sweden ranks first in the Gender Equality Index overall with a score of 82.2 and also ranks first in the Knowledge domain.

Table 1 Brief characteristics of analysed documents (Dvořák et al., 2018)

Country	Document	Date	Total No of pages	Main features
Czechia	*Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education*	2004–2007 Various versions of original document 2023 Version after "minor" revision (analysed)	164	Representative of the "new curriculum" oriented towards outcomes and general competences with considerable autonomy of schools. The so-called "minor" revision updated the teaching of digital skills, to be followed by a "major" revision of other domains.
Estonia	*National curriculum for basic schools*	2014 Introduction and subject curricula	317	The latest (so far) in a series of reform curricula following the country's restoration of independence from the Soviet Union. Considered as a successful balance between ensuring access to equally high-quality general education for all and, at the same time, autonomous space for schools, as well as one of the reasons for the Estonia students' success in international comparisons.
Ireland	*Primary School Curriculum*	1999 Introduction and subject curricula	1079	The primary education curriculum has only undergone modernization in the area of language teaching since 1999 and is currently undergoing a review and redevelopment. The lower secondary education curriculum, published gradually in the 2010s, has brought an emphasis on literacy, key competences, flexibility, choice and pupil wellbeing.
	Framework for Junior Cycle	2012, revised 2015 Introduction 2017–2023 Subject curricula		
Sweden	*Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare*	2008 First version 2018 Updated version (analysed)	303	The result of a neoconservative curricular reform, implemented in schools since 2011 (known as Lgr11), seeking to hybridize global competency and traditional continental content focus.

2.2 Documents Analysed

The national curriculum for compulsory education in Czechia (Table 1) consists of one document covering all the subjects taught at elementary school plus a general introduction to the educational system and to the Czech school as an institution. The Estonian national curriculum consists of a general introductory curricular document for elementary school and 13 individual curricular documents, each for a specific

subject.[1] The Irish national curriculum consists of a general introductory document and an individual document for each subject taught at the given level of education. On the primary education level, this study analyses the introductory document and curricular documents for ten curriculum areas, while for lower secondary level it analyses the introductory document and curricular documents for five "core" subjects that are compulsory for all students (Department of Education, n.d.).[2] The Swedish national curricular document consists of one document encompassing general information about the school as an institution and individual subjects.[3]

2.3 Data Analysis

Both deductive and inductive coding were used to systematically examine the documents. The deductive coding was based on theoretical sensitivity through which it was possible to draw concepts and apply them to the data that were analysed (Glaser & Holton, 2004). Inductive coding allowed the emergence of new themes and categories from the data and identified the structural components of the curriculum that were not predetermined but surfaced during the analysis (Williams & Moser, 2019). The documents were analysed through preliminary coding to allow for the refinement of codes before applying them to the entire dataset, ensuring greater accuracy and consistency in the subsequent analysis.

For this study, national curricular documents were analysed to find all instances that deal with the topic of gender, gender equality, and specific aspects of gender issues. Together with specific instances of phrases containing the term "gender", other terms and phrases that were analysed were those connected to equality (only in cases where it was clear it also concerned gender equality), instances that mentioned men and women (boys and girls) and instances that mentioned sex (only if it was mentioned as a sociological concept).

One instance means each individual gender and/or equality issue regardless of the number of words. For example, one instance can be: *gender*; *gender stereotypes*; *men and women*. In cases where more of these issues are listed one after another, each one is coded as one instance, for example: *explain the nature of gender roles and describe gender-stereotyping attitudes* contains two instances (gender roles; gender stereotypes). When citing the excerpts from the curricular documents, the incidences can be presented in the sentences or parts of sentences for context.

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1 Estonia's subjects are: *language and literature*; *foreign languages*; *mathematics*; *natural science*; *social studies; art subjects*; *technology*; *physical education*; *religious studies*; *informatics*; *career education*; *entrepreneurship studies*; *descriptions of cross-curricular topics*.

2 Irish subjects for primary school are: *visual arts*; *drama*; *music*; *primary language*; *mathematics*; *history*; *geography*; *science*; *physical education*; *social, personal, and health education*. Irish core subjects for Junior cycle are: *English*; *Irish*; *mathematics*; *history*; and *wellbeing*.

3 For the purposes of this study the analysis did not include the parts of the documents that covered the *Preschool class,* so the text that is analysed is comparable for all four countries.

3 Results

This chapter presents an introductory analysis of each curriculum, the overall attitude towards gender issues within the curriculum of each country and the four main categories that were created to map the presence and organise how gender issues appear in the curricula: 1) *terms and phrases*, 2) *subject*, 3) *structural components of the curriculum* and 4) *the gender dimension in educational content*. The first category analyses the terminology and specific language each curriculum uses to address and discuss gender issues and helps identify how the curricular documents choose to integrate, describe and present gender in the educational framework. The second category maps where gender-related topics appear across educational areas and subjects, revealing possible gaps (e.g., limited coverage in STEM subjects). The third category organises gender issues into structural components of the curriculum, encompassing broader pedagogical approaches, as well as educational goals and values of the curriculum. The fourth category addresses instances of the gender dimension in educational content which aims to eliminate or limit inequalities (European Institute for Gender Equality, n.d.-a), enhance critical thinking, improve learning outcomes, or address gender stereotypes (Korsvik & Rustad, 2018).

3.1 Gender and Curricular Documents

The Czech curriculum uses a binary view of gender, focusing on male/female dichotomy. It does not explore intersectional or spectrum-based views of gender, and it does not elaborate on gender identity or diverse expressions beyond male/female roles. It follows traditional division of gender roles and conveys a conservative message – the importance of men and women treating each other politely – while it does not explore gender as a category, power balance or gender diversity. It uses outdated terminology for issues connected to gender identity which may suggest that the curriculum either implicitly assigns a negative connotation to the issues or that it does not consider the issues important enough to update the content of the curriculum.

The Estonian curriculum also references the male/female dichotomy and does not contain any mentions of gender identities. It highlights the importance of gender equality and discusses gender stereotypes, gender differences or gender roles, but all of these are mostly focused on the conventional dichotomy of men and women and do not recognise a broader gender spectrum.

The Irish curriculum mostly references gender issues as men/women issues, but this binary is transitioning to a broader understanding of gender in some of the newly published curricular documents for individual subjects. When addressing gender issues, the curriculum in some cases promotes critical thinking and reflection of gender relations, gender identity and stereotypes.

The Swedish curriculum addresses gender in its complexity and encourages both teachers and students to critically analyse the binary norms, relationships and identities. In the curriculum, gender is understood as a spectrum more than a binary. The

document promotes a proactive approach in exploring, analysing and understanding gender issues, which are embedded across the whole curricular documents, not as a standalone topic, but as one of the key principles of education.

3.2 Terms and Phrases

The Czech curricular document contains 13 instances of terms connected with gender issues (Figure 1). The document mostly uses generalised language, and potential gender issues are to be found in broader topics such as equality. The document does not diversify its terminology, and it does not contain a single use of the term *gender*. Instead, the Czech curriculum replaces this term with the term *sex* (in some cases the term *gender* would be better suited for the documents, e.g., "forming positive relationships with the opposite sex at school and outside school", Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2023, p. 53). The curriculum contains a phrase "sexual identity disorders" (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2023, p. 93), which, from the context, refers to gender dysphoria (Claahsen-Van Der Grinten et al., 2021), previously called gender identity disorder. The term was changed in 2013 to align with other terminology and to remove the connotation of the word disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Retaining this term can stigmatise individuals experiencing gender dysphoria and produce stereotypes about this diagnosis.

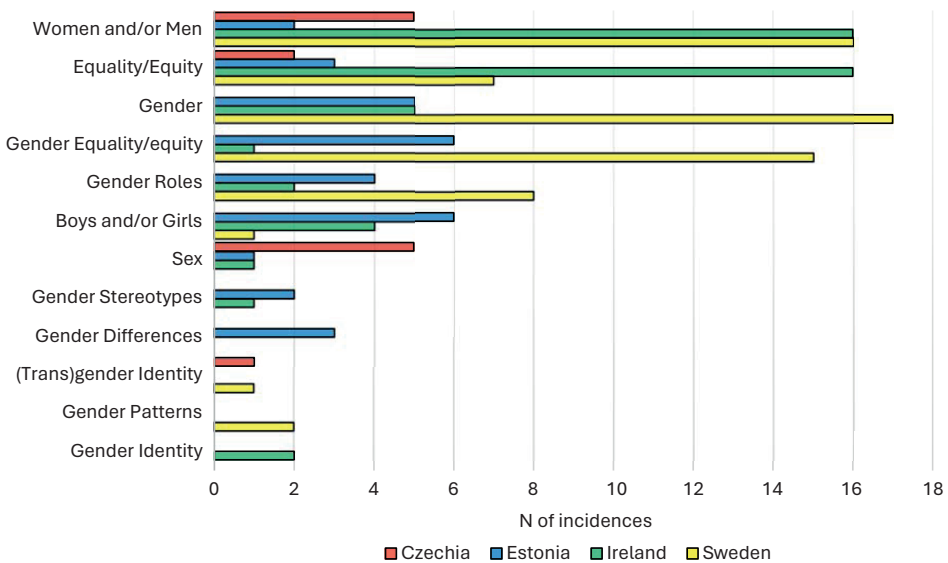

Figure 1 Incidences of terms and phrases in curricular documents by country
Note. The numbers presented in Figure 1 are absolute, they represent the total number of all incidences found in each country's document(s).

The Estonian curricular documents have a total of 32 instances of terms related to issues of gender and gender equality. Estonia's curriculum reflects a diverse but moderate use of gender-related terms. The actual number of instances is not very high, but the documents contain a range of different aspects of gender topics, e.g., gender differences, gender roles, gender stereotypes ("name and value positive traits in themselves and others and understand the peculiarities of individuals, gender differences and special needs of people", Ministry of Education and Research, 2014, p. 16).

The Irish curricular documents feature 31 instances of gender-related terms. While there are some instances of terms detailing specific gender issues (i.e., gender roles, gender identity), and the overall set of terms and phrases used in the curricular documents is diverse, most of the instances in the Irish curricular documents are localised within two general groups – women and/or men, and equality ("A central aim of education is to ensure equality of opportunity for all children", Ireland & National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999c, p. 28). The documents show a considerable emphasis on addressing issues related to both women and men.

The Swedish curricular document stands out with a total of 67 instances of various gender-related terms. The curriculum uses a wide range of phrases, both general (women and/or men, gender, gender equality) and specific terms for aspects of gender issues (gender roles, gender patterns, transgender), reflecting a nuanced approach to gender topics. Sweden's use of diverse terms indicates a comprehensive integration of gender issues into the curricular documents ("developing students' ability to critically examine gender patterns and how they can restrict people's life choices and living conditions", Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 7).

3.3 Subjects

The Czech curricular document covers in total seven subjects or educational areas (Figure 2) and each contains only minimal instances of terms concerning gender. Most instances are found in social science subjects or areas as well as in physical and health education, where the document several times mentions "respect for the opposite sex" during sport activities but does not specify what that entails (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2023, p. 98).

Despite the higher number of instances on the topic of issues of gender and gender equality, the Estonian curricular documents accumulate most of these instances in one subject: social studies. In total, these topics can be found in four subjects. One of these subjects is technology (career and technical education), which focuses on the equal distribution of knowledge and skills to both boys and girls, highlighting that technology and STEM subjects are often accompanied by stereotypes and prejudice leading to low participation of female students (e.g., "The division into study groups is not gender-based", Ministry of Education and Research, 2014m, p. 2).

The Irish curriculum mostly integrates topics relating to gender or gender equality into subjects within social studies and the humanities & arts. In history (humanities

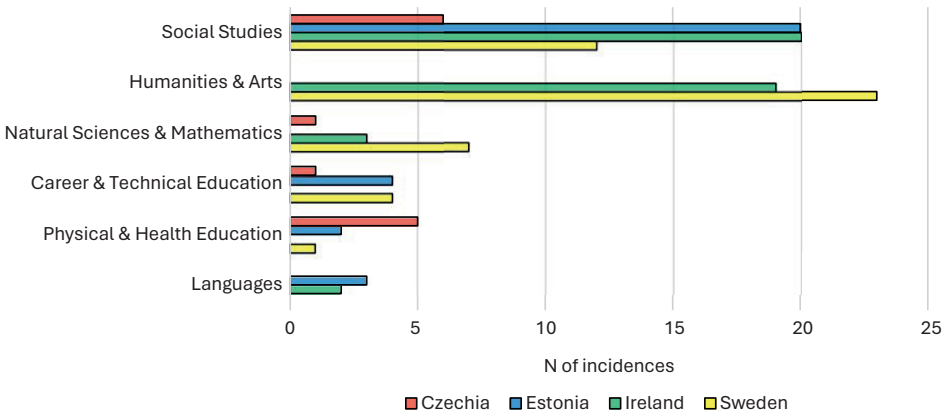

Figure 2 Subject areas containing gender issues by country
Note. The numbers presented in Figure 2 are absolute, they represent the total number of all incidences found in each country's document(s).

& arts), the content of education analyses the different conditions and life journeys of men and women while also opening a space for discussing gender aspects of historical events ("explain how the experience of women in Irish society changed during the twentieth century", Department of Education and Skills, 2017b, p. 17). Gender issues and topics are integrated into six subjects in total.

The Swedish curriculum mentions gender equality as one of the cross-disciplinary areas that should be integrated into different subjects (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 17), but also specifically includes these topics and in several subjects (10 subjects in total). Most instances are found in the social sciences and humanities and arts subjects, but there is also an example in music, which contains an instance of the gender dimension in education, demonstrating that most if not all subjects have room to integrate this topic ("The functions of music to signify identity and group affiliation in different cultures, with a focus on ethnicity and gender", Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 162).

3.4 Structural Components of the Curriculum

In the Czech curricular document, gender issues are primarily addressed within learning outcomes ("forming positive relationships with the opposite sex in the school environment and outside school", Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2023, p. 54). Gender issues also appear in the structural components encompassing the educational content and description of a school subject. Gender issues are not present outside the parts of the curriculum that deal with school subjects/educational areas (Figure 3).

The structural components that are covered are quite diversified in the Estonian curricular documents, spreading throughout the educational process. The documents

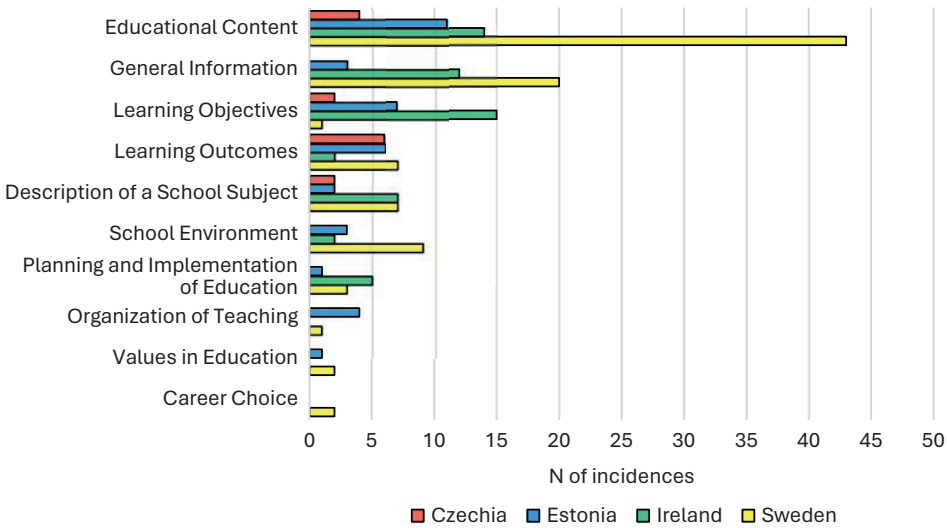

Figure 3 Structural components of the curriculum by country
Note. The numbers presented in Figure 3 are absolute, they represent the total number of all incidences found in each country's document(s).

mostly integrate the issues of gender and gender equality into educational content and learning outcomes and objectives. The curricular documents focus on the values of equality in education, highlighting this need not only in the school environment but also in the planning and implementation of education ("study is organised according to a project-based format, incl. projects that connect different subjects and areas of life, cooperation with businesses, and cooperation between boys and girls in home economics, handicraft, and technology studies", Ministry of Education and Research, 2014m, p. 8).

The Irish curricular documents mostly integrate gender issues into the educational content and focus on them as an objective of learning ("Changing roles of women in the 19th and 20th centuries", Ireland & National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999c, p. 55). Integrating gender equality into the planning and implementation of education also appears in curricular documents. As with previous categories in the Irish curriculum, gender issues are present only in a portion of the structural components of the curriculum.

The Swedish curricular document mostly integrates gender issues and topics into the educational content, specifically topics concerning gender and gender equality. 20 instances of gender issues can be found in the part of the curricular document that contains general and introductory information. Other instances relate to the school environment (e.g., promoting the principles of gender equality, cooperation between students, etc.), learning outcomes and within the descriptions of school subjects. Most instances of gender and other connected issues appear in the in-

troductory part of the document, where they present values, the principles and function of the school, describe the ideal planning and organising of education and address the responsibilities of school employees ("The school should therefore organise education so that pupils meet and work together, and test and develop their abilities and interests, with the same opportunities and on equal terms, regardless of gender", Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 7)

3.5 The Gender Dimension in Educational Content

Czechia offers one instance of the gender dimension in educational content, which is very generally phrased ("equal opportunities within the labour market", Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2023, p. 110 and similarly to the previous examples, may not be construed as an opportunity to teach about different perspectives if the teacher does not consider that there are, in fact, different opportunities for women and men.

Two of the subjects in the Estonian curricular documents that contain gender issues integrate the gender dimension into educational content, which in most cases is presented very generally and without a specific context of explanation ("relations between boys and girls", Ministry of Education and Research, 2014f, p. 32).

Irish curriculum illustrates an effort to incorporate the gender dimension into educational content. It offers substantial examples of gender perspectives within the curriculum. The Irish curricular documents present the gender dimension both in a broad context and in specific examples ("recognise unequal treatment of sexual roles and other issues in literature, advertising, drama, magazines and other media", Ireland & National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 1999h, p. 66).

The Swedish curricular document integrates the gender dimension and offers different views and experiences throughout several subjects, with some instances going into great detail ("How cultural attitudes towards technology have an impact on men's and women's choice of occupation and use of technology", Swedish National Agency for Education, 2018, p. 300).

4 Discussion

The *Czech Strategy for the Education Policy of the Czech Republic up to 2030+* (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy, 2020) focuses on gender being considered, eliminating gender stereotypes and incorporating gender topics into education content. Estonia's *Education strategy 2021–2035* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2021) promotes gender being considered in the education process. Similarly, Ireland indicates equality as one of the key components to tackle in the following years in its *Statement of Strategy 2023–2025* (Department of Education, 2023). The *Gender Equality Policy in Sweden* (2024) specifically mentions the curriculum for compulsory education, stating that all schools should "actively and consciously further equal

rights and opportunities" as well as "counteract traditional gender norms". The education strategies, or equality strategies that also focus on education, of all the countries that were analysed place the emphasis on the importance of equality.

All four countries integrate some topics and issues connected to gender into their national curricular documents, but they vary across all the categories presented here, as well as in the overall attitude towards integrating gender issues and topics into the curricular documents. While Sweden, Ireland and Estonia follow their educational or equality strategy policy documents and show an effort to incorporate gender, Czechia's curricular document, despite its educational strategy specifically mentioning gender in educational content, avoids the term 'gender' and dealing with gender issues. Sweden's results in this analysis correspond with its score in the GEI, leading in all the categories and overall presenting a comprehensive approach towards integrating gendered content into curricular documents. Ireland scores high in the GEI, but the results in this study, especially compared to Sweden, do not correspond as it displays only a moderate effort at integrating gender and gender equality issues, mostly in the general sense of equality. The Irish curricular documents also match the results for the Estonian curricular documents in some categories. While Estonia ranks low in the GEI, both overall and in the Knowledge domain, it also shows similar efforts to the Irish curricular documents, lacking significantly only in the category of subjects in which gender issues are present. Czechia scores the lowest in the overall GEI, but ranks 16th in the Knowledge domain, which does not correspond with its results in this study. Czechia's curricular document falls behind in all the categories, and the analysis shows that it could contribute to sustaining or even reproducing gender stereotypes. The Czech curricular document underwent a major revision, and the new Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education was accepted in December 2024. The new curricular document integrates gender issues into the content, using more diverse terminology (gender identity, gender roles) and integrating these issues also within the learning outcomes (Národní pedagogický institut České republiky, 2025), although the integration of these issues remains limited both in the total number of incidences and in the diversity of presented gender issues.

The results illustrate that the incorporation of global educational trends concerning gender equality of each country into their curricular frameworks happens selectively and in ways that reflect local discourses that can also be seen in the results of the different domains of the Gender Equality Index. With its extensive and explicit references to gender equality, Sweden exemplifies substantive borrowing, which corresponds with Sweden's top ranking on the Gender Equality Index and its longstanding national focus on equality. Sweden integrates gender issues both into its educational policies and strategies, as well it's curricular documents. Ireland adopts a selective policy borrowing and/or partial translation, framing gender issues in a more general context, despite its high ranking within the GEI, which suggests a strong focus on gender equality. It is possible that this gap will be reduced within the new curricular documents. Estonia also expresses selective borrowing, in this case the result suggests strategic translation – gender issues are covered but contained

within a small number of subjects. This corresponds with Estonia's lower results in the GEI, which suggest a deficient interest in gender issues. Czechia illustrates a rhetorical adaptation of trends concerning gender issues in education. While Czech policies and strategies mention these issues in some detail, the curricular documents integrate them in a very limited and narrow way. This suggests that actors in Czechia realize that trends connected to gender issues are being highlighted as priorities supranationally, but they are not priorities locally and they do not resonate with local discourse.

The methods employed in this study offered a robust framework for exploring how gender issues are integrated into national curricular documents using both qualitative and quantitative methods for in-depth understanding and measurable comparison. The methods are limited, focusing only on the intended curriculum, while the teaching practices may differ significantly. The frequency analysis provides quantitative data on the occurrence of gender-related terms, but it does not consider the context or the lengths of the curricular documents of each country. A high frequency of specific terms does not necessarily indicate a deep or positive engagement with gender issues. The study does not analyse the actual implementation of the curricular documents – such analysis would be a recommended next step in the research concerning gender in curriculum. The qualitative content analysis inherently involves the researcher's interpretation, which introduces a degree of subjectivity, and while this study employed methods to ensure its validity, the choice of methods does carry a risk of lower validity.

5 Conclusion

Gender equality is a priority for education policies at the supranational level and an important topic for all the selected countries, yet the approach towards the integration of gender issues into the curriculum varies widely, with some of the analysed countries falling behind in both their national educational or equality strategies and their ranking in the Gender Equality Index.

Sweden's curriculum demonstrates the most comprehensive integration, addressing gender issues across various subjects and through detailed thematic aspects, which aligns with its high ranking in the Gender Equality Index. In contrast, Ireland, despite its strong overall performance on the Index, adopts a more generalised approach, often addressing gender in broader equality contexts. Estonia's curriculum, although it covers fewer subjects, highlights a commitment to addressing gender issues within social studies and technology, reflecting some alignment with Estonian education strategies. Czechia, however, presents a contrast, with minimal inclusion of gender issues and a tendency to maintain gender stereotypes, diverging from its national education policies.

The results illustrate that the integration of gender issues in education from a supranational level to a local level to a practise does not happen in a vacuum, but

rather within country's sociocultural backdrop, aligning with arguments that the contents of curricular documents are never neutral. Rather, they reflect local conceptions of what knowledge and values should be prioritised. Gender mainstreaming is amongst the global trends that gain resistance, remain under-realised or only symbolically referenced.

Future curriculum development should focus on ensuring that gender issues are not only acknowledged but deeply embedded across all subjects and within all the aspects of the curriculum, fostering a more inclusive and equal learning environment for all students. Further research could explore how the curriculum that is implemented reflects these gender-sensitive policies and identify best practices for translating policy into classroom reality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank Dominik Dvořák, Ph.D. for his time and expertise. I would also like to thank the editorial office and the reviewers for their useful feedback and guidance.

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Speech at conference Next Steps for Curriculum Reform and Implementation in Wales, 26 April 2024

Editorial Note: This speech was given by Lucy Crehan on Policy Forum for Wales conference on curriculum in Spring 2024. The Curriculum for Wales is being implemented since September 2022 in all primary schools and since September 2023 for all secondary schools in Wales. The speech reviews a range of recent evidence on curriculum reform, calling for Welsh Government to reconsider the role of knowledge in their new curriculum framework. We are very grateful to Lucy Crehan for permission to publish her text. Its relevance extends far beyond the case of Curriculum of Wales. Last but not least, we consider it important for the current curriculum revisions in our region — in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and undoubtedly in other countries as well.

We have an unusual opportunity in Wales to learn from the past, in a way that helps us to see into the future. We have, if you like, a metaphorical crystal ball. There are two countries that have taken very similar approaches to our Curriculum for Wales (CfW), and which implemented these curricula long before we did. They are purpose-led, they divide the curriculum into areas of learning rather than subjects, and they have moved away from specifying disciplinary knowledge and skills, and instead set out student outcomes which are very similar in their framing and their level of generality to the Descriptions of Learning in the Curriculum for Wales.

Scotland and New Zealand introduced these curricula a few years before the Welsh Government commissioned Professor Graham Donaldson's *Successful Futures* report in 2014, which kicked off the construction of CfW here (Donaldson, 2015). I'm not so interested in revisiting what happened in the first few years of those curricula, as I'm sure Professor Donaldson took all of the relevant evidence at the time into account in his report, and that Welsh Government did the same in accepting his recommendations. I'm going to share with you what has happened in the decade since. Because I think it can, and should, inform the next steps for the Curriculum for Wales.

Before I do that, let me make something clear. Do not think, because I have an English accent, that I am some English policy commentator that has come here to throw stones. Wales is my home. Wales is the land of my fathers. I am the granddaughter of a Welsh teacher and the mother of Welsh children. I've worked with schools across the country supporting them with curriculum design. I care deeply about this

https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2024.17
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country, its children, and its schools. And I don't want its education system to be like England's either. I agree wholeheartedly with the vision of Curriculum for Wales. I just don't think that the current framework alone does enough to support schools to realise that vision. Let me tell you why.

One of the reasons set out by Professor Donaldson for curriculum reform in Wales was that standards were low. Specifically, he referred to the PISA results as a reflection of those standards, which were then, and are now — in the words of our new Cabinet Secretary Lynne Neagle — disappointing. I think there is more to education than just PISA results, despite my career history. But I do think that these standards in reading, maths and science are an important part of the bigger educational picture. And our metaphorical crystal ball suggests that the current structure of the Curriculum for Wales framework will not support an improvement in these standards.

Scotland and New Zealand have both seen a decline in their mathematics and science PISA results over the decade or more since they introduced their high-level curricula, and New Zealand saw significant declines in reading too (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2023; May et al., 2019). This was the case even before the impact of the pandemic. Of course, this doesn't prove that it was the introduction of these curricula that caused this decline, but it does tell us that at the very least the curricula approach taken did not halt the decline, and it *certainly* did not improve standards. Unlike Scotland and New Zealand when they first introduced their curricula, we don't have room for manoeuvre. Wales can't afford to fall any further (Sibieta, 2024).

Additional pause for thought should come from the fact that both countries are in the process of refreshing or updating their curricula, and in both cases one of the changes they are making, or thinking about making, is reducing the ambiguity of the existing curriculum statements, and being clearer about the learning that cannot be left to chance.

In New Zealand, the government stated that "being clear about the important learning that all *ākonga* need" (which is Māori for learner) was one of the "crucial areas needing the greatest change"[1]. And the recommendations of a series of pilot curriculum reviews by Education Scotland, made public by *TES Scotland* in April 2024, included the suggestion that "greater clarity on the knowledge learners should have" is needed "at key points in learning" (Seith, 2024).

Let's take a moment to notice what it is they're changing, and what they're not. Commitment to the purposes of these curricula remains. Their vision, remains. They have learned though, that they need to be clearer about what children need to know in order to help them to achieve those purposes.

Why is it that they've focused on clarity around knowledge, and reducing ambiguity? I'll just share two key problems that the absence of specificity has caused, which have emerged in the past decade, and which are relevant to us here in Wales.

[1] This quote was from the NZ government website accessed in 2021 and has since been changed. The following page expresses the same sentiment though — https://ncea.education.govt.nz/have-your-say.

The first is inequity. When the curriculum contains only high-level, somewhat ambiguous statements, it leads to variation in interpretation that doesn't only lead to differences in taught content (which needn't be a problem), but to different standards in different schools. I'll quote from a study from New Zealand in which Wilson and colleagues looked at different interpretations of the same high-level literacy standards in different schools serving different demographics.

> Unequal opportunities for minority students and those from economically disadvantaged communities are a well-recognised and documented problem […]. What our findings point to is the extent to which the problem not only persists in New Zealand secondary schools but is aided by the unintended consequences of the flexibility of the curriculum and assessment systems. (Wilson et al., 2016, p. 222)

In subsequently announcing the refresh, the former New Zealand Associate Minister of Education stated:

> It is critical that our national curriculum is fit-for-purpose, and that there is a coherent system of supports for its delivery by *kaiako* and teachers across Māori and English medium pathways. The variability, inconsistency and inequity that is characteristic of our system shows that we haven't got this right yet. (Tinetti, 2021, para. 5)

Our own academics here in Wales warn of a similar risk with Curriculum for Wales. Professors Sally Power, Chris Taylor and Nigel Newton wrote:

> Without wishing to question the good intentions of the government or undermine the efforts of the many schools and teachers who are pioneering the new curriculum, we fear that — somewhat paradoxically — far from reducing educational inequalities, the new Curriculum for Wales may actually exacerbate them. (Power et al., 2020)

There is currently very little knowledge that all children in Wales are entitled to.

The second problem thrown up by a lack of specified knowledge and skills is felt at transitions. Even if every primary school had high standards and high expectations for their pupils, the lack of commonality across them leads to a lack of coherence in curriculum between primary and secondary, leading to the problems of repetition and boredom for some children, confusion caused by gaps in learning for others, and disengagement for all. This lack of a common base was the cause of a recommendation by the OECD in Scotland to "consider how the design of CfE can better help learners consolidate a common base of knowledge, skills and attitudes by the end of broad general education" (OECD, 2021, p. 13). Similarly, Education Scotland reported from their pilot reviews that

> participants also identified potential consequences of a lack of clarity for the position of knowledge on transitions from primary to secondary… Differing interpretations were felt to create variations in the knowledge base of learners moving to secondary from feeder primary schools. This, it was postulated, then undermined confidence of secondary staff who then responded to the lack of a common base of knowledge by 'starting again'. This was viewed as a potential barrier to progression. It was felt that problems

> such as these could be addressed by providing greater clarity (and thus consistency) of what learners would be expected to know by the end of the primary stage.[2]

The introduction in Wales of 27 very high-level statements of what matter (Education Wales, n.d. — b) will not overcome this problem. None of this was known to be the case in 2014, or, indeed in the case of that last quote, even two weeks ago. Before I close with some suggestions about what we might do with all of this new information, I'd like to address two more fundamental reasons why a lack of specified knowledge has been problematic in these countries, and why it will be problematic in Wales — if we don't bring some in. These are the downgrading of knowledge in practice, and the importance of young people having webs of connected knowledge for 21st century skills and for reading.

Way back in 2014, so in this case, before the publication of *Successful Futures*, Professors Mark Priestley from Scotland and Claire Sinnema from New Zealand warned that these new curricula could lead to a downgrading of knowledge (Priestley & Sinnema, 2018). Their analysis found that while both curricula place a strong emphasis on the importance of acquiring knowledge in their guidance, as does CfW, they are less clear in specifying what knowledge is to be acquired, nor are they clear on the processes which practitioners might follow in order to specify such knowledge. Fast forward a decade, and in a recent paper, Priestley and colleagues write,

> in the lack of central specification, research in Scotland suggests that teachers fall back on instrumental… rather than educational rationales for selecting content… This in turn can lead to an enacted or experienced curriculum that lacks coherence and any sense of connection with educational purposes. (Priestley et al., 2024)

Already in Wales, before the introduction of the new curriculum, we had many primary schools selecting and organising knowledge from the curriculum based on the degree to which it linked to a whole-school topic. Now, these topics continue to drive content selection, but this time, it's the descriptions of learning that are being linked in and labelled as the knowledge in topic planning, even though in many cases, these include no disciplinary content.

For example, the Descriptions of Learning do not specify any music (Education Wales, n.d. — a), and the only mention of it in the What Matters Statements is as part of the sentence: "By exploring forms and disciplines in the expressive arts, whether through experimentation, play or formal research and inquiry, learners can develop an understanding of how the expressive arts communicate through visual, physical, verbal, musical and technological means." How then, is a non-music specialist supported to understand what they should, or even could teach in music? At the moment, they do not have that support, that scaffold.

The content taught in schools is therefore to a large extent driven by what resources are already available in the school, in paid-for schemes, or online. Various

[2] The full reports from Education Scotland are not yet publicly available, but were kindly shared with me by *TES Scotland*.

calls go out on the CfW Facebook group like, "I'm struggling to think of some fun & interesting ideas and activities to teach a Year 2 class around the concept of 'Adventure' — does anyone have any ideas?" and "Does anyone have any good planning on Australia they could kindly share please". In some schools, this leads to an activity-based curriculum where knowledge is downgraded, and those disciplinary ideas which *are* taught are not carefully sequenced, revisited and built on.

This is not a criticism of those schools or teachers, who work bloody hard in an increasingly challenging context, with little time or money (National Education Union, 2023) for resource development or professional learning. This is an invitation to Welsh Government to revisit a curriculum framework that doesn't currently support non-subject specialists to identify and sequence important ideas and skills in Art, Music, History or Geography, to name but a few; ideas that *can* absolutely be taught as part of a topic, but whose inclusion is currently left up to chance.

Why is this a problem? Why does it matter what children know and understand these days, so long as they have the skills? Because one of the other things to emerge over the past decade has been increasing evidence from cognitive science about the importance of knowledge for 21st century skills, and for reading comprehension (Willingham, 2006).

This isn't about learning isolated facts; in fact I'm arguing for the opposite. Isolated facts are what you end up with if you don't deliberately plan a curriculum around progression in knowledge. To think critically about a topic, or to be creative in a domain, you need to draw on connected webs of knowledge and understanding, which students need to build up over the *course* of the curriculum. That means engaging with concepts like democracy, rivers, tempo, colour, tragedy, and trade, and the rich contexts through which these can be taught, starting in primary school, building on that learning in secondary school — not repeating it — and giving students opportunities to make connections and apply their understanding throughout.

Those of you who know the Curriculum for Wales well will know that this is already the intention of the curriculum. The principles of progression (Welsh Government, 2021) include "Deepening understanding of the ideas and disciplines within areas" and "Increasing breadth and depth of knowledge". But if we are to learn any lessons from our neighbours in Scotland and New Zealand, it should now be apparent that the absence of clarity around what students should know and be able to do in the existing framework undermines these worthy intentions. And given the increasing awareness of the importance of knowledge for reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2021), and the poor reading standards across Wales, we have an opportunity here to solve several problems with just a few moves.

There is one solution to this problem, which is not drastic, and is entirely in-line with the existing framework. Nothing needs to be abandoned, or even changed. As part of the pioneer process, teachers were asked to come up with the knowledge, skills and experiences that underpinned the What Matters Statements. Some groups broke these down, outlining what progression could look like in disciplinary knowledge and skills at each progression step. However, later in the process this valuable

work was then collapsed into bulleted lists and some of it put in the 'Designing your curriculum' section of the guidance, thereby removing any support for teachers around what disciplinary progression could look like and reducing any commonality of learning across primary schools that could have provided a foundation on which secondary schools could build.

The next logical step for Curriculum for Wales, in the light of what we now know, would be to revisit that decision; revisit the place of knowledge in the curriculum framework, and map out disciplinary progression from progression Step 1 to Step 5, to sit alongside the Descriptions of Learning, and to provide guidance for schools. This could then facilitate the sharing of high-quality curriculum-linked resources between schools and provide a framework for subject-specific professional learning.

Most importantly, being clear about the learning that all children are entitled to would address inequalities, facilitate transitions from primary to secondary school, and support schools to bring the knowledge back in, drawing on learnings from international evidence, eminent academics at home and abroad, and established cognitive science. We did not know all this ten years ago. We do now. We have a moral imperative to do something about it.

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European Educational Research Association Season School on Curriculum and Annual Conferences in 2024 Nicosia, Cyprus, 23rd—30th August 2024

In August 2024, three interlinked professional events were held in Nicosia, Republic of Cyprus under the auspices of the European Educational Research Association (EERA): a summer school on curriculum research organised by Network 03 "Curriculum", an EERA Emerging Researchers' Conference, and a European Conference on Educational Research (ECER). Doctoral students and senior staff of the Faculty of Education of Charles University participated in all three events. The new, dynamically growing campus of the University of Cyprus provided a very pleasant environment for all the presentations and meetings. In particular, many international participants did not miss the opportunity to work or rest in the library building or the university dome, which was designed by the architect Jean Nouvel.

Season School of Network 03 "Curriculum"

The summer school of the curricular Network 03 EERA on 23—25 August had the motto "Boundaries, Borders, and Frontiers in Curriculum Research: Theoretical and Methodological Challenges", which also reflected the situation of the host country, for decades divided between the Greek and Turkish parts. (Indeed, the buffer zone between the two territories runs within sight of the campus, and occasionally we were able to meet patrolling United Nations soldiers.) Therefore, the organisers included in the summer school programme a lecture by members of a local non-governmental organisation running educational programmes for both Turkish and Greek residents and visitors to the island, focusing on modern history and teaching in post-conflict societies. The lecture was followed by a guided tour of the city divided by the "green line".

However, the main part of the summer school consisted of lectures and seminars on theoretical and methodological problems of curriculum research, presented by leading Cypriot, Greek, and other European researchers. As part of the programme, Dominik Dvořák from Charles University also led two workshops (on the positionality of the researcher and on other methodological aspects of dissertations; on the use of the experience of Central and Eastern European countries for curriculum reforms).

https://doi.org/10.14712/23363177.2025.1
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Emerging Researchers' Conference

The Emerging Researchers' Conference (ERC) took place at the University of Cyprus on 26th—27th August and it was organised into eight sessions of different kinds (e.g. introductory, interactive, workshops, paper sessions).

The interactive session for all participants (led by Ioulia Televantou and Michalis Michaelides) showcased the opportunities offered by large-scale surveys and learning analytics in education. In addition to traditional sources of information (e.g. PISA, PIRLS), the discussion also explored the possibilities of exploring student learning through data collected from social networks and educational (typically web-based) platforms. The participants became respondents in a live research activity to observe the type of data gathered through questionnaire completion by themselves. The presenters also discussed the ethics of data collection, particularly regarding obtaining respondents' consent to the provision and analysis of such data, especially in web-based environments.

The paper sessions provided many opportunities to get to know emerging researchers from different fields of educational science. "Powerful Knowledge and Social Justice" by Talin Saghdasaryan was one of the contributions related to curriculum research as it addressed contemporary theories focused on the content of instruction. The author summarised thoughts related to the concept of powerful knowledge with a Venn diagram which showed the tension between *powerful knowledge* and *knowledge of the powerful* and mentioned three possible pathways to its solution. The crucial question, however, has not been answered yet: "How can we decide if the knowledge in science *is powerful knowledge* (gives power to students) or if the knowledge is *knowledge of the powerful* (gives students power over the rest of society)?"

Kamil Cinkraut from Charles University presented a paper on the methodology and preliminary results of a literature review focusing on theories of meso-level curriculum making in science education. The participants appreciated the precision of the methodology and shared their own (often frustrating or upsetting) experiences with searching for theoretical and conceptual frameworks for their research projects and publications. Some of them even offered the pragmatic piece of advice that, at a certain point, one simply needs just to pick and stick to one of these frameworks so that the research can move forward.

Main Conference: Education in an Age of Uncertainty

The main conference was attended by 2,299 participants from 71 countries who delivered 1,680 presentations, including 150 group submissions (symposia, workshops, panels). The programme was held under the motto "Education in an Age of Uncertainty: Memory and Hope for the Future". In this way, it reacted not only to the "frozen" conflict in Cyprus, but above all to ongoing conflicts taking place geogra-

phically nearby in the Middle East, Ukraine, Africa, and other parts of the world. As the speakers' voices reminded us, the metaphor of "age of uncertainty" is part of a broader rhetoric that asks us to respond to the challenges of global change. At the same time, the concept of uncertainty is trivialised and simplified. It can be an epistemic concept — the uncertainty of knowledge, the uncertainty of truth. Research needs some paradigmatic certainties, however, some starting points, but what is considered certain in one area or discipline may be highly problematic or problematised in another discipline. Above all, it is people who find themselves and live in a situation of uncertainty. There are conceptual analyses for uncertainty in general, but paucity of empirical research studying e.g. experience uncertainty and the reactions of different actors to it.

According to one of the keynote speakers, Antoni Verger, the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the absence of global governance in the field of education and the lack of a globally coordinated response to the polycrisis (a trendy term coined by A. Toole). The number of international actors dealing with education is growing; a deeper analysis of the reaction of organisations such as the OECD or UNESCO, however, has shown that they were actually just trying to recycle their old solutions as a response to new problems.

Governments in democracies tend to create new instruments, the number of which is increasing: new policies are introduced without abandoning old ones. This is in conflict with the idea of deregulation as a global trend — on the contrary, we observe "policy growth", "policy accumulation", or the "democratic responsiveness trap". The "3 I's" are important for analysis: institutions, interests, ideas.

(Neo)liberalism is contested. There is a backlash against liberal values, which manifests itself as anti-globalisation, fragmentation, or multi-stakeholdism. The world is increasingly complex and multipolar; there is not one common global educational agenda. Education is a "big sector", with many actors and interests, which makes it particularly resistant to change, but partial interests can dominate key areas such as the curriculum.

At a time when the number of nations with illiberal and authoritarian regimes is increasing, Michalinos Zembylas presented a very important keynote lecture titled Educating for Anti-Complicity in the Era of Global Crises: An Affective Response to Political Violence. (The concepts that were presented are also useful for analysing the totalitarian past of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which we are still coming to terms with.)

The key thesis of the lecture was that everyone who lives in a non-democratic state cannot avoid a certain degree of involvement in its practices. But that does not mean that everyone is equally involved or that they bear the same responsibility. What can we learn from stories of complicity and resistance? How is resistance to systemic violence possible when everyone seems to be part of the system?

Complicity and resistance are not binary oppositions, but rather a continuum of positions that people occupy in the course of their lives, possibly in different roles (Mihai, 2020, 2021). The position of the actors must be understood relationally,

dynamically, and in time. Complicity and resistance have complex manifestations in various contexts (Nazi Germany, occupied countries, colonial situations): they are not ontologically essentialist positions, but must be understood contextually (with regard to e.g. gender, SES …) and as situated. It is the result of some situation in which a person has been (individually or as a member of a group). An "implicated subject" (Rothberg, 2019) can be a victim in one situation, a perpetrator, collaborator, or bystander in another. There are different "grey zones of complicity" (Primo Levi).

Zembylas (2024) offered an answer to the fundamental question of how to educate young people for resistance, when we are all — teachers and students — embedded in the institutions and practices of the regime. He emphasised the engagement of actors in education with structures of (political) violence, especially through an affective lens. However, apparently it is easier to analyse a problem than to offer a universal solution.

Curriculum Network

As usual, the contributions in the individual sections focused on current issues, including those described above, as well as on perennial topics of individual domains. In the field of the curriculum, there is a well-known diagnosis not only of a crisis of the discipline, but of a crisis of understanding this crisis. One of its causes may be the drift of curriculum studies towards a broad perspective of cultural studies, which may result in the neglect of practical issues of curriculum design through excessive theorising and politicisation of the field. Following Verger's above-mentioned analysis, the curriculum is expected to satisfy multiple and often conflicting demands: to nurture the competences for economic growth while promoting sustainability, as well as democratic/civic values and respect for diversity. At the same time, there is always PISA and assessments derived from such metrics. As Mark Priestley has pointed out, the controversy is often framed as a dichotomy: a competency-based curriculum on the one hand, or a so-called knowledge-rich approach on the other hand. Such polarisation can obscure the complexities behind the construction of curriculum policy. At first glance, it seems that the solutions in different countries are similar — that is, for example, the emphasis on key competences, "big ideas", integrated subjects, etc. But a more detailed analysis shows that behind these "labels", in different countries very different contents can be hidden.

Many systems around the world also ask questions about how to support teachers in curricular work and/or the making of school curricula. Ensuring coherence across the different levels and places where the curriculum is created appears to be particularly important. This requires systematic care for a shared understanding of the goals of the reforms (e.g. between the ministry, the curriculum institutes, and schools; between teachers of different subjects in the school, etc.). Coherence and a clear understanding of the reform are not self-evident, but are the result

of continuous communication. Important conditions for success include the shared effort of different actors to achieve positive change, equal relationships and trust between professionals in various positions, and respect for the different roles and responsibilities of the people involved. Typical barriers are insufficient financial resources and established ways of thinking.

Some of the inspiring approaches we learned about at the conference include e.g. a differentiated understanding of the teachers' curricular work according to the point of the career path in which they are located (Nieveen et al., 2024). A student teacher, a beginning teacher, an experienced teacher managing a subject committee, a school coordinator, or a teacher involved in regional or national cabinets or committees — each of them has a different capacity to create a curriculum. Various forms of support tailored to these different roles were articulated in the workshops organised by Network 03 of the EERA during the conference. The workshops revealed how the creation of the curriculum encounters contradictions: it is necessary to include as many actors as possible, but this complicates the possibility of reaching agreement: a broad consensus in today's post-modern era is impossible. It is not possible to please everyone, but everyone's voice and expertise must be respected.

In this context, it is important to pay attention to the *meso level of curriculum making*: it is the place where mediation takes place between the political level and practice — abstract ideas are supposed to become concrete contents here. For this, it is necessary to build capacities by connecting actors from different levels and also involve them at different levels, e.g. teachers from practice at the meso or macro level, etc. Three types of sources/flows must meet and correspond here: semiotic (meanings, curricular ideology, language and communication, the concept of the curriculum); material (finance, physical space, documents, textbooks, artefacts); social (relationships, pedagogical strategies, social forces of cooperation and networks, group dynamics) — see Dempsey et al. (2021).

Daniel Muijs studied the relationship between curriculum type and pedagogical strategies. It was assumed that those professionals who follow the "knowledge" orientation usually prefer direct/responsive teaching, while competence-oriented approaches tend to be associated with constructivist approaches. The authors of the research concluded that within the United Kingdom, England and Northern Ireland have very different curricula: the English curriculum (2013) contains 11 separate subjects (each with its own "programme of study"), emphasising knowledge and phonics in reading. In contrast, in the Northern Ireland curriculum (2007) there are six cross-curricular areas; reading is part of the communication area, phonics being seen as a part of a broader approach. The researchers used the PIRLS 2021 data, where there is a curricular questionnaire. The results show that teachers declare attitudes that are rather the opposite of what the authors expected according to the initial hypothesis. The explanation of the findings suggests that although the curricula differ, there are many other common factors, such as approaches to student assessment — both countries have a similar examination and testing system (Northern Ireland's system is selective; there is a "transfer test" at the end of primary

school, and although a centrally mandated test is not compulsory, all schools do it). The school culture (e.g. uniforms) is also similar; in addition, some teachers from Northern Ireland were educated in England.

Among other topics discussed, the role of different types of *partnerships* for research and for improving school practice should be mentioned. Examples included the cooperation of universities with school districts and individual schools in the design and implementation of research projects — here the seemingly trivial fact was recalled that the success of such cooperation is extremely strongly influenced by specific members of senior staff, especially school principals. Non-profit organisations (NGOs) form successful partnerships with schools and communities. In the United Kingdom, the "Cost of school day" project involved mapping the financial costs that can be an obstacle for students participating fully in education. The researchers created a space for students and teachers to share their perception of poverty problems. Teachers were often surprised by what their students were saying about their day-to-day struggles. Poverty leads to the fact that some students lack the basic prerequisites for successful learning, such as enough sleep and warmth in the home, they are hungry, and they experience the stress and worries of their families. In the British context, typical problems are the purchase of a school uniform, participation in field trips, or other costs that may be associated with special educational needs. The school's partnership with the NGO enabled improvements as a result of personal relationships, knowledge of the local situation, and the organisation's reputation in the community, which allowed it to gain local support, the role of an external observer, and a critical friend. Important conditions for the success of similar projects include a shared effort to achieve change, an emphasis on children's voices, a non-stigmatising approach to student support, and an equal relationship and trust between the actors — not judging the schools (it is not their fault) and respect for the different roles and responsibilities of the actors. Typical barriers are insufficient financial resources and established ways of thinking.

Gender and Education Network

At this moment, there are 34 networks within the EERA. Some of the newer networks were created as an answer to the fact that just like the global world, educational research is also dynamic and ever-changing and it is important to pay attention to issues that emerge. One of these networks is Network 33 — Gender and education. The contributions presented within this network at ECER 2024 showcased a range of different gender issues in the context of education.

The presentations offered many perspectives on gender issues. One of the sessions of this network was called *Beyond the binary* and many contributions (as well as some others outside this session) dealt with moving behind the binary dichotomies of gender, expanding understandings of gender and sexuality and advocating more inclusive curricula and teacher training, including contributions on queering

education and supporting LGBTQ+ students and educators. A major part of the presentations talked about gender inequalities in education, gender biases, and stereotypes existing in school environments and the intersections of inequalities that many people within the school environment face. The researchers also explored the role of universities in generating equity and justice. A standalone session dealt with prevailing inequalities in STEM and offered possible ways to bridge the gender inequality gaps in these fields. The main theoretical framework discussed within Network 33 was critical realism and Margaret Archer's contribution to critical analysis of intersectional gender inequalities (Abbas & Taylor, 2024)

Anna Donovalová from Charles University presented a paper analysing gender in national curricular documents, thus intersecting gender and curriculum networks/topics. Her results showed that the integration of gender issues within the curricular documents differs significantly across countries, which supports theories that curricular documents are not neutral, but are affected by socio-cultural discourses (Elwood, 2016). A similar focus on the process of integrating gender equality into curricular documents and its form within the Finnish curriculum was also presented during the poster section (Myyry, 2024), suggesting that even though the focus on gender and curricular documents was not encountered frequently at the conference, it is an important perspective in educational research.

The meeting of the network members also opened important and interesting questions regarding gender as a concept — what is gender, what do we mean exactly when we talk about it within educational research, how does gender transform and change, and how do gender issues differ, depending on the region? These are all necessary questions for understanding the complexity of gender issues in education.

Both the professional and social programmes of all three above-described events set the bar high for the organisers of subsequent conferences. In 2025, ECER will be held in Belgrade (Serbia).

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Acknowledgement to Reviewers

The Editors of the *Orbis scholae* journal would like to take this opportunity for thanking the following colleagues who reviewed articles published in Volume 18.

Noemi Bravená
Michal Čerešník
Radka Dofková
David Greger
Jan Hábl
Lenka Hloušková
Sabine Hoidn
Martin Chvál
Lucie Jarkovská
Petr Knecht
Dagmar Krišová
Denisa Labischová
Veronika Laufková
Barbora Loudová Stralczynská
Jana Obrovská
Jakub Pivarč
Petr Soukup
Jan Svatoš
Jiří Štípek
František Tůma
Jan Vyhnálek