

## **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).

## 62 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,

**64** 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

**66** 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 (Myrsky, 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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