

Curriculum making across European nations

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Curriculum thinking should be at the heart of educational practice in schools. And yet, for many years, curricular questions have been eclipsed by a narrow focus on standards, outcomes and accountability, which can preclude us from asking educational questions about the purposes and practices of schooling. It is, therefore, encouraging to see a recent renaissance of interest in curricular matters. In particular, the term ‘curriculum making’ – a rather old concept – has re-emerged in educational discourse. But what does this mean? And why does it matter? These questions are raised in our new book, *Curriculum Making in Europe: Policy and Practice Within and Across Diverse Contexts*, which explores curriculum making through nine country cases studies (Priestley et al., 2021), and which also sets out a heuristic framing for understanding curriculum making as systemic activity.

This framing is premised on an understanding of the curriculum as much more than the specification of content. Instead, we view the curriculum as the multi-layered social practices, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated. There are at least three dimensions to this.

- The notion of curriculum as social practice; something ‘made’ by practitioners and other actors working with each other.
- The idea that curriculum is made across multiple ‘sites of activity’ within education systems, for example macro policy making, meso support for school-based curriculum making, and micro development of teaching programs in schools. Different actors (e.g., policymakers, teachers, students) may be active across multiple sites. The figure below illustrates how curriculum making occurs systemically.
- The multitude of practices that comprise curriculum, including the development of policy frameworks, the selection of knowledge/content, pedagogical approaches, the organization of teaching (e.g., timetabling) and the production of resources and infrastructure for supporting curriculum making in schools.

[Figure about here]

In this article, drawing upon examples from our book, we briefly explore features of supra, micro and meso curriculum making, illustrating the connections, and flows of ideas and practices across education systems. A key point in understanding the concept ‘sites of activity’ is that it does not refer to organisations or actors *per se*, but to the form that the activity takes; theorising it in this manner enables us to analyse discourses and practices, as well as ask questions about “the channels through which they are generated and disseminated, the factors and system dynamics that affect the flows of ideas, and their effects” (ibid, p. 16).

Supra curriculum making is transnational in scope, external to state or national education jurisdictions, and facilitated or even made necessary by globalisation. It comprises the “transactions that occur in such [transnational] settings, and emergent discourses, influences and flows of ideas that percolate through educational and other communities” (ibid, p.15). One of the things that makes this site so complex and compelling to study is that it refers to a wide range of bodies, institutions and actors of quite different backgrounds and purposes, placing often contradictory demands on national governments. Supra actors include UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education, which prioritises inclusion, access and equity, while others, such as the OECD and the World Bank, have strong economic and political agendas, for which ‘quality education’ is viewed as pivotal. Supra curriculum making is also

undertaken by international networks of academics and policymakers, activist organisations and NGOs, and commercial operators such as Pearson. It leads, *inter alia*, to “the production of exemplar curriculum and competency frameworks, country reviews, international examinations or national examinations of international currency (e.g., International Baccalaureate, IELTS, IGCEs), international benchmarking (such as PISA) and the generation of general discourses” (ibid, p. 15). These activities and resulting products influence curriculum making within national education jurisdictions through ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ policies, as well as via diverse policy borrowing and learning processes.

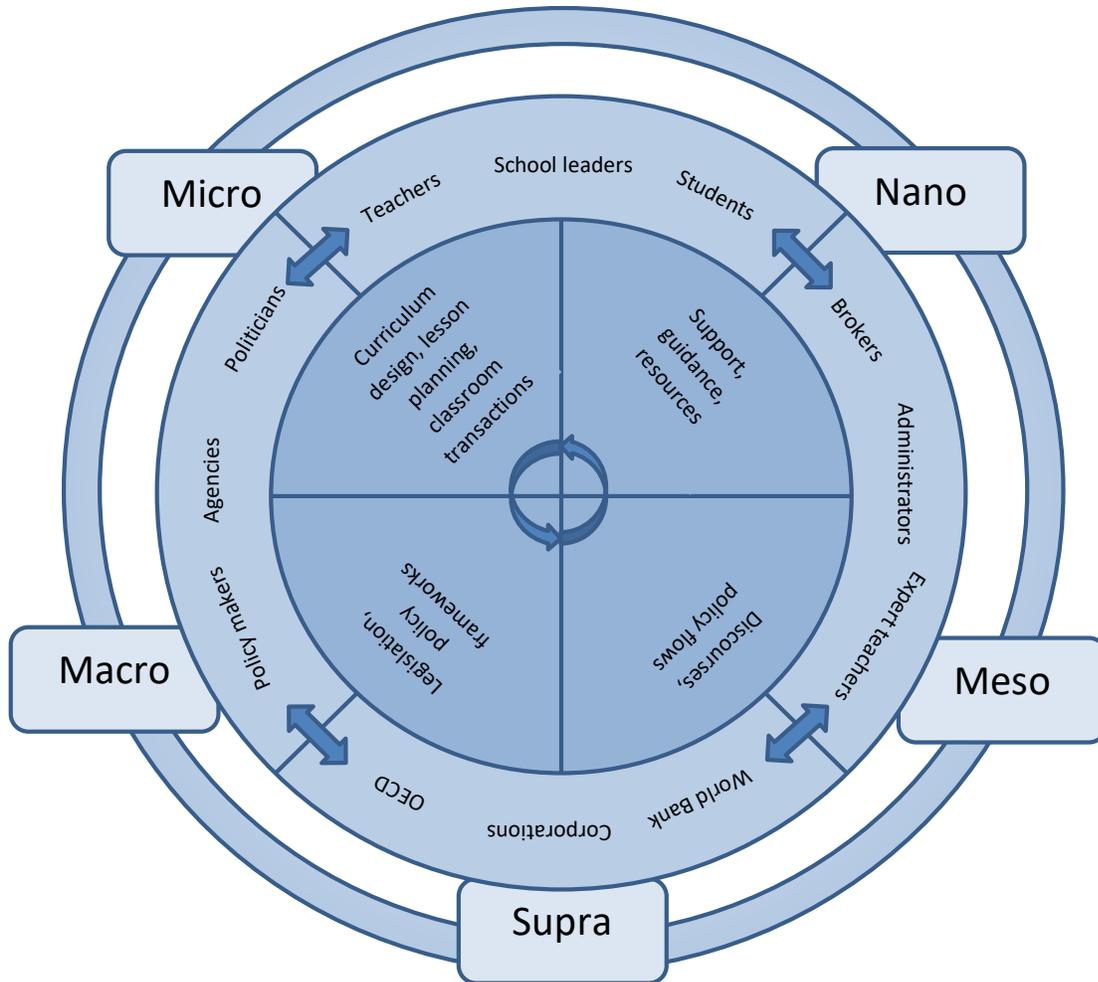
Such developments in global curriculum policy during recent decades have had significant impact on national curriculum making – the site of activity referred to as ‘macro’. Two emergent trends are discernable: First, there is a ‘curricular turn’ towards competence-based and learner-centred curricula based on the notion of twenty-first century skills. Excepting England and Sweden, the country cases explored in our book are examples of this, albeit playing out quite differently. The second general trend is a tension between regulation and deregulation, paired with neo-liberal influences that have paved the way for performance-based systems and accountability regimes. Such curriculum policies often claim to support and enhance teacher agency, while at the same time intensifying ‘re-centralisation’ processes, including the construction of systems for evaluation and audit. In many ways, the post-Westphalian order remains intact – not least in light of traditionalist-nationalist movements gaining political ground in Europe. However, against the backdrop of policy flows and the porous boundaries between the supra, macro, meso, micro and nano sites of activity in curriculum making, we note how traditional macro curriculum making is being transformed. For example, a state-controlled emphasis on professional development for teachers, and guidance and support for principals and teachers in local curriculum making, has highlighted the importance of the meso site for curriculum making, while reminding us the centrality of the macro site where such policies are designed and funded.

The country cases in the book suggest that the meso site of activity has emerged as a very significant space ‘in between’, where ideas and experiences of nano and micro curriculum making in schools meet supra and macro curriculum making. The meso site of activity is a sphere where policy, support and guidance for curriculum making are provided, co-ordinated and communicated, more or less successfully. Actors within meso sites of activity play a significant role in curriculum making, mediating and translating messages flowing from supra and macro, as well as from micro and nano sites of activity. The power positions, objectives, skills and orientations in meso sites direct both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ in curriculum making. Different kinds of meso actors were described in the European cases as orchestrating processes and creating local strategies and structures to support curriculum making: district level authorities (Finland), local education authorities and expert teachers (Sweden), subject-area counsellors (Cyprus), Regional Improvement Collaboratives (Scotland), local innovative hubs (Czechia), and seconded teachers and leaders (Ireland). These varying ways of organising curriculum making in meso sites create specific conditions that may either hamper or facilitate teacher agency in the system; and maintain, reclaim or even undermine professional integrity and autonomy.

The above discussion highlights the importance of thinking – and acting – systemically, when engaging in curriculum making. This means making sense of discourses, developing policy that is coherent and facilitatory – and which importantly does not place conflicting demands on practitioners. It means developing appropriate channels and structures for curriculum making that cohere across the system, and which connect different actors meaningfully. Above all, it entails creating the conditions and resources for genuine professional agency as different actors make the curriculum.

Reference

Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S. & Soini, T. (2021). *Curriculum making in Europe: policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Bingley: Emerald.



Sites, actors and activities (Alvunger et al., 2021)