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Critiquing Curriculum Policy Reform in Finland and Australia: A Non-affirmative, and Praxis-oriented Approach

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Introduction

In this paper, we explore whether and how key curriculum policy documents in two national contexts - Finland and Australia – are mediations between broader ‘global’ challenges, and local conditions, and how the content of subsequent curriculum documents/content are more or less ‘educational’ in their intent for the teachers and students to whom they are directed. We argue the aims, contents and methods of key curriculum policy documents in these two national settings reveal that curriculum-development processes are no longer limited simply to the individual nation-state, but to an increasing degree, reflect both national and transnational (‘global’) influences, even as such documents seek to respond to more localized circumstances and conditions within individual nation-states. Comparative educational curriculum research is a particularly useful vehicle for bringing to light the variable nature of these relationships, and how broader transnational influences are expressed in curriculum policy documentation. In this article, which refer to an international research program on comparative curriculum and leadership research based on non-affirmative education theory (Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017), we describe and compare the values, aims and priorities (‘why’) as reflected in the contents (‘what’) of key curriculum documents for these national contexts, and the methods (‘how’) by which these are to be taught.

We begin by highlighting the broader global and national political discourses associated with the development of the specific national curriculum in each context, including the influence of evaluation in this process. We then elaborate the conceptual resources – non-affirmative action, and practice-as-praxis – we bring to bear to better understand the nature of these broader conditions, and how they have influenced the nature of curriculum policy reform in each context. The paper then proceeds to provide an analysis of the principal curriculum policy documentation – the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014* (FNBE, 2014) in Finland, and the *Australian Curriculum* (ACARA, n.d.) in Australia to analyze how these broader conditions have influenced the nature of curriculum reform at the policy level in each country. We conclude that while current approaches to curriculum development, and these foci, have the potential to cultivate more non-affirmative, praxis-oriented proclivities amongst students, as expressed in the curriculum ‘content’, these are challenged by both more neoliberal conditions and pressures, and a tendency towards ‘closure’ in the respective curricula in relation to individual and collective challenges that



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confront students as tomorrow's citizens. We elaborate important differences between the two national settings, even as reveal several points of intersection and policy 'overlap.'

Understanding curriculum in the context of Globalization and Neoliberal policy reform

Curriculum reform and associated policy making is reflective of significant global processes. Broad processes of economic globalization, expressed as neoliberal policy-making, have been particularly salient during the past 30 years. These processes have been manifest in different countries, and within different cultural traditions. Such processes have been expressed differently; various forms of path dependency, as the expression of individual nation-states, are evident, even as policy borrowing has become more normalized (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). In many ways, globalization is something of an empty signifier – a term that seems to be unanimously understood, but that is actually used to describe any manner of practices and phenomena (Popkewitz, 2004). Consequently, the nature and effects of globalization processes is heavily contested.

Nevertheless, particular conceptions of globalization do have considerable cogency, and have gained increasing influence in varying national contexts. Furthermore, such manifestations are not simply economic, but expressed in relation to all social arena, including education. The OECD's educational policies, including in relation to standardized measures of student attainment through international large-scale assessments are good examples of such phenomena.

Such standardization processes are reflective of what Sahlberg (2016) refers as corporate management approaches to concerns about the quality of schooling across nation-states. Standardization of teaching, and testing of students and teachers, as well as the reconstitution of public schooling into more privatized ventures reflect the influence of various kinds of globalized educational accountabilities (Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti & Sellar, 2016). Such processes are enabled through the influence of international student assessments, particular Programme for Internal Student assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Advocacy for forms of decontextualized, ahistorical conceptions of educational improvement based on standardized literacy, numeracy and science scores are evidence of the sorts of decontextualized reforms that have gained increased currency most recently. However, these are not the only influences at play.

In this paper, we take the contested nature of globalization processes as our starting point for better understanding how curricula have been manifest in specific national contexts – namely Finland and Australia. While there has been strong institutional support for such reforms, and nations have become increasingly influenced by such reforms through the logics of competitive nationalism, encouraged through such advocacy, and supposed processes of policy-borrowing encouraged by such bodies as the OECD, whether and how such processes transpire as such is a matter for empirical inquiry.

A broad historical overview of curriculum reform

A broad, sweeping attempt to conceptualize the nature of curriculum reform, in a Western perspective, over the past 150 years might reveal how specific curriculum texts, and associated policies and politics, have simultaneously reflected and sought to constitute more broader social practices and processes at the national level, connecting education to more general ideas of what ends education should serve. Broadly speaking we may, first, refer to a pre-modern era 'subordinating' education to foundational perceptions of the origin and future of humanity as expressed through tradition and religion. Second, from the 19th century



onwards education may be construed as oriented to the construction of modern nation state. Construction of national identity was central, in addition to the promotion of context- and content-independent competencies, such as reading and mathematics. These were to serve the liberal view of the individual and her future as non-determined – as open to any number of future possibilities and opportunities, and reflective of an education that provided the capacity to think and analyse, even as the content of the actual education that played out may have been overly determined or prescribed (Benner, 2015).

Just as the curriculum policy documents of the latter part of the 19th Century, and early 20th Century, may have been focused upon processes of nation building, those of the post-World War II period perhaps emphasized more dominant disciplinary conceptions of knowledge – again for national ‘gain’. In contrast, the curricula documents, processes and practices of the 1970s could be construed as oriented towards more political citizenship development, and critique of established social practices. After 1989 and subsequent conditions of curriculum reform gestures towards an increased focus upon economist cultivation of the individual as a consumer (Gunter, Grimaldi, Hall & Serpieri, 2016).

Most recently, and notwithstanding the significant rise of much more nationalistic influences and foci at the level of the nation-state, curriculum policy reform can be seen as the product of not only national influences, but also broader, transnational - often described as ‘global’ - conditions. These conditions give rise to what Peck and Theodore (2015) refer to as ‘fast policy’ reforms - initiatives that are construed as ‘universally’ applicable within a broader neoliberal context, and somehow able to be adopted contemporaneously, without concern for context. Such homogenization is also exacerbated by technological changes that trend towards ‘sameness’, including through processes of inter-operability between various international, national and sub-national data sets. Arguably, such potentially ‘decontextualized’, transnational approaches to education reform are more focused on economic and labour-market reforms, rather than more traditional approaches to education for citizenship.

At the same time, the nation state is caught in the tension between processes of increasingly global homogenization, and local pluralization. These more homogenizing influences all sit in tension with more nationalistic tendencies, and fractious localized politics that serve as symptoms of an uneasy relationship between supporter and opponents of these broader globalizing and homogenizing processes and the economization of post-industrial society. Under these circumstances, cultural differences have been reconstituted, in many national settings, into ‘problems’ of dislocation, disorientation, and sometimes hostility and conflict towards ‘the other’. Recent nationalist responses both reflect and constitute the increasingly neoconservative conditions within many nation-states throughout the world. Seeking to respond educatively to these tensions is vital, given the social, political, and economic tensions and contentions generated within nation-states, and particularly amongst the most disenfranchised.

However, the specificity of such ‘global’ influences is not simply a given, but an empirical question. How do broader neoliberal pressures play out in national contexts, in relation to curriculum reform? How is this reflected in the policy and political discourse that surrounds curriculum policy and politics?

In an effort to answer such questions, this article analyses how recent curriculum reforms in two national contexts – Finland and Australia – define the preparation of reflexive students. What kind of citizenship ideals are promoted, what kind of societal, humanist and global values and ideas about justice are supported? Such an analysis requires explicating the broader political and administrative governance process of curriculum making – the ‘process’ of curriculum reform – as well as the subsequent ‘product’ – the ‘curriculum’ – of such



reform. In contemporaneous work, we are exploring the nature of the curriculum reform ‘process’ (e.g. Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017; Tian & Risku, 2018). However, this article is limited to an analysis of the ‘product’ of such reforms in Australia and in Finland, as expressed in key policy documentation in each national context. Consequently, we focus on the ‘content’ of curriculum reform – the aims or ‘why’ of curriculum, the ‘what’ of curriculum, and the ‘how’ of teaching methods supported in the curriculum; these elements are also all part of the broader continental/European Didaktik tradition (e.g. Benner, Meyer, Peng & Li, 2018).

To help understand the curriculum ‘product’ – aims/values (‘why’), content (‘what’) and methods (‘how’) – of this reform process, and the extent to these aims, contents and methods are productively ‘educational’, we draw upon Dietrich Benner’s notion of a ‘non-affirmative’ theory of education (Benner, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017), and neo-Aristotelian insights into practice as praxis. These resources enable us to critique the extent to which the national curriculum documents (the ‘curriculum’) discursively promote a conception of teaching that allows teachers to develop local curricula and practices to foster future citizens capable of engaging in the broader policy and political circumstances outlined above, but not in prescriptive, ‘telling-students-what-to-believe’ ways, but in ways that open students up to inquiry into important issues and how to think through them openly, but productively, and with an orientation to fostering a more inclusive, sustainable world. We argue that a necessary pre-condition for such disposition is an education which helps to build students’ understanding of such issues in a robust, dialogic process.

Deng (2013), following Young (2013) has argued that contemporary curriculum theorizing and research have failed to give sufficient credence to curriculum as the ‘object’ of research – that ‘educational discourse and policy development have been accompanied by a loss of the ‘primary object’ in the contemporary curriculum field’ (p. 583). This focus upon ‘what is taught and learned in school’ (Young, 2013, p. 101), and how this is to occur, however, is a key focus of attention in this paper. However, we seek to understand this ‘object’ of curriculum reform as not simply ‘text’ on a page (or, as evident in the Australian case presented here, ‘text’ on multiple webpages), but also as knowledge ideals as a contextualized product of a broader political, and often contested, process of educational reform. Given the centrality of evaluation/assessment processes in educational reform more broadly, including curriculum reform processes, the relationship between curriculum and assessment (hereafter referred to as evaluation) is also important and needs to be explicitly addressed.

Curriculum in context: The relationship with evaluation

To understand curriculum reform, we cannot simply focus upon curriculum alone. Contemporary comparative research must include attention to the specific cultural and historical contexts in which curriculum reform is undertaken. It is important to realise, processes of curriculum reform in global contexts have not occurred in isolation. While curricular have traditionally been construed as a key ‘input’ to the educational enterprise, the increased attention to ‘outcomes’ in education has more recently heightened the focus upon evaluation processes. The following diagram seeks to summarize these changes over a 50-year period (1968-2018), and how recent attention to outcomes differs from earlier periods.

Also, while different countries might, in their curriculum policy documents, represent similar ideas about aims, contents and methods of teaching, how these aims, contents and methods may be practiced in schools and classrooms is largely affected by evaluation or assessment practices in each polity. The assessment practices obviously regulate/frame teachers’ degrees of freedom or autonomy to affirm or not to affirm given aims and contents.



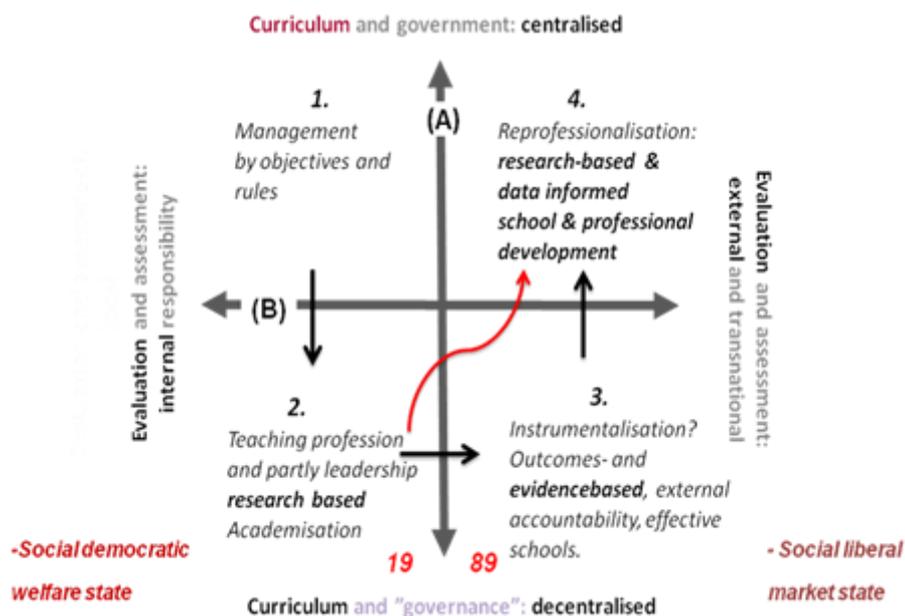


Figure 1. Positions and changes Western curriculum policies during the past five decades (Uljens & Nyman, 2013)

In the first part of this 50-year period, the history of curriculum change was characterized by an increasingly centralized approach, particularly in Anglophone settings. This involved a broad shift from more context-specific and responsive approaches to curriculum development and reform (curriculum reform as school based) to a much more centralized approach. The 1988 Education Act, with its increasingly prescriptive curriculum in the English context, is emblematic of such a shift. During the same period, however, more neoconservative and neoliberal logics did not exert influence to the same degree in many continental and Nordic countries. Consequently, in these countries, processes of decentralisation of curriculum, associated with increased valuing of differentiation within educational systems and professionalization of the teaching force, were more evident.

At the same time, and in both Continental and Anglophone settings, from the late 1980s, schooling became characterized by increased attention to evaluation. These evaluations increasingly served as indicators of schools' performance, often as part of a broader strategy of the marketization of education. Gradually, this focus upon results replaced attention to the 'input' side of the educational 'equation'. Education became increasingly competitive, with the assumption that competition would enhance educational 'quality'. At the same time, during the 1990s, these outcomes came to be closely associated with increased emphasis upon literacy and numeracy, with such foci construed as essential for enhanced economic productivity more broadly within an increasingly technology-intensive world. Such skill development was associated with work-related competency development. The use of more and more standardized tests was also seen as a vehicle to provide parents with more 'objective' information about educational quality.

More recently, as outlined above, more competitive and economic logics have been manifest in increased attention to national and international standardized literacy and numeracy test results. International testing processes, particularly with the shift from more UNESCO-led (IEA) surveys to OECD-led (PISA; PIRLS) measures, have focused even greater attention upon large scale assessments as significant markers of the 'quality' of

educational systems. As a result, curriculum-making practices and processes have arguably become much more centralized. However, this process is manifest differently in different countries. Curriculum making and especially curriculum enactment must therefore be understood in relation to such evaluation processes in context; evaluation and curriculum have to be thought of together. This does not mean that evaluation somehow simply determines curriculum reform, but it is to suggest that the two processes occur concurrently, and that different nation-states position themselves differently in relation to processes of homogenization and heterogeneity in relation to evaluation.

Assessment as evaluation in Australian and Finland

In Australia, even as education is the constitutional responsibility of the individual states, evaluation is expressed most overtly through the National Assessment Plan, particularly in relation to elementary/primary ('basic') education. Even as the most significant national assessment practices – National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy – have a much greater influence upon primary schools than secondary schools, in many ways, much focus on assessment is 'situated' at the national level, while teaching is positioned at the state (i.e. sub-national) level. NAPLAN assessment is a census-style test undertaken by all students in Years 3 and 5 (primary), and Years 7 and 9 (secondary). The aims (expressed as 'benefits') of the NAP are explicitly oriented to identify areas of strength and weakness, and for accountability purposes:

Two benefits of the NAP are to help drive improvements in student outcomes and provide increased accountability for the community. ... All Australian schools benefit from the outcomes of national testing. Schools can gain detailed information about how they are performing, and they can identify strengths and weaknesses which may warrant further attention (ACARA, 2016).

The approach to NAP is that Australians can expect education resources to be allocated in ways that ensure that all students achieve worthwhile learning during their time at school. The reported outcomes of the NAP enable the Australian public to develop a general national perspective on student achievement and, more specifically, an understanding of how their schools are performing (National Assessment Program, 2016). Public accountability is explicitly referenced in the Australian context.

In Finland, national testing exists in a very different format, and is characterized by a survey rather than a census-style approach to evaluating educational performance. Furthermore, the approach to assessment is explicitly oriented to supporting learning:

Under the Basic Education Act, the aim of pupil assessment is to guide and encourage learning and to develop the pupil's capability for self-assessment. The pupil's learning, work and behaviour shall be variously assessed. These tasks are the point of departure for developing the assessment culture in basic education. The emphasis is on assessment that promotes learning (FNBE, 2014, p. 49).

In this way, attention to assessment is more obviously oriented towards learning, rather than accountability, as in the Australian context. Furthermore, in the Finnish context, education providers (municipalities) are responsible for assessment practices, rather than the nation-state:

The education provider monitors the implementation of the assessment principles in the schools and supports the development of assessment (FNBE, 2014, p. 50).

There is similarly the case in Australia in that the individual state governments are constitutionally responsible for education, rather than the federal government. However, the very existence of the National Assessment Program means that there is much more attention to performance on various forms of national measures in the Australian context, particularly NAPLAN, especially in primary schools.

The way in which these data are presented to schools is also differentially situated between the two nations. In Australia, schools' NAPLAN results are available publicly through the *MySchool* website, while in Finland, the municipalities have to purchase the results. The way in which the results are used is also vital. In Finland, teachers want to know 'how is my class doing'; in Australia, while teachers and schools certainly want to know how their students have performed, this is associated with a heightened sense of concern about how their school compares with similar ('like') schools, and with various national averages in literacy and numeracy subcategories. Because the results are published through the publicly available *MySchool* website, schools may be shamed by these results. This publication of results also feeds into discourses of the need to provide 'choice' to parents.

To help undertake a context-responsive analysis of curriculum policy reform, we make the case for the need for comparative curriculum research under current policy conditions to also include issues in relation to evaluation. A comparative curriculum research approach, such as the comparison we provide here of recent Finnish and Australian curriculum reforms, is particularly helpful for not only understanding the mediation between national and transnational ('global') influences, but also whether and how nation-states seek to respond differently to more localized circumstances and conditions.

A comparative methodology

Why Finland and Australia?

We draw upon two varying national curricula, with distinctive national political identities, to reveal how distinctive and different policy and political contexts influence approaches to curriculum, even as these nations are simultaneously buffered by more transnational/'global' processes. On the one hand, both Australia and Finland might be described as adopting broadly 'welfare-society' approaches to public provision, including education. However, they are also politically distinctive in ways that are useful for revealing the variation that arises within national contexts.

The Finnish and Australian cases represent two different western traditions in public policy provision. The more continental-European consensus-oriented tradition, with its 'thicker' state has a different approach to such provision and contrasts with the 'thinner' state that characterizes the Anglo-American approach. Moos' (2017) describes how the Nordic tradition differs from that in UK/US:

It is reasonable to conclude that the UK/US had societal and political systems more inclined to build on rational choice theories – because of the belief in a liberal, and weak state; on principal-agent theory because of the bigger power distance and GINI and lower trust in people; and on market-thinking because of the stronger belief in civil society and market. The UK/US thus seem better equipped to take in the transnational ideas of New Public Management' (p. 157).

The more disputational Westminster system in the Australian context also demands a much more communicative discourse in relation to decision-making, while the more consensus-oriented political system in the Finnish context reflects a much more multi-party system, requiring leading parties to develop coalitions to form government.

Historical circumstances and differences are important for understanding how broader neoliberal influences play out in curricula reform within each national context. Australia has a 'settlement' history dominated by British colonization, and for the Indigenous peoples, this meant dislocation. This influences the cultural character of the country and influences deemed important at present (including the focus upon 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures' as an important 'cross-curriculum priority' in the Australian Curriculum). Finland, as a small 'peripheral' nation, borders two historically dominant powers (Sweden ruled Finland until 1807, and then Russia after the Napoleonic Wars (1809); however, it is also important to note the Grand Duchy of Finland, established after 1809, also enjoyed much more freedom (own currency; laws) under Russia).

Importantly, Finland has been used as a 'comparator' country amongst those advocating policy borrowing, while Australia is construed as a country needing to 'learn' from more 'successful' countries, such as Finland. Paradoxically, principles of GERM (Sahlberg, 2016) encourage comparison, and competition between countries. So various solutions should be those of more successful comparator nations! However, as we argue here, this is not necessarily the case.

Structurally, we acknowledge differences between the Finnish and Australian educational systems. Finland has a strong national system, with the delivery of education as the responsibility of the municipalities (as is evaluation). As a federal system (somewhat akin to the German model), education in Australia is the constitutional responsibility of the individual states. Because of the primacy of the states in education, and because of historical circumstances, there are considerable differences between the individual states. While the 330 municipalities in Finland have the constitutional right to lead curriculum work and evaluation independence, the small size and relative weakness of these municipalities in relation to the national level, means their impact is reduced. We also acknowledge that there are variations in the way individual municipalities and states mediate and co-construct broader national initiatives; the larger and more powerful states and municipalities exercise much more power than smaller, weaker states and municipalities, which are much more dependent upon the nation-state (Finland), or subordinate to pressures and demands (such as in relation to national assessment) exercised at the federal level (Australia).

The value of a comparative curriculum research approach under current policy conditions

At the same time, we also acknowledge that comparative approach to research into curriculum has an important recent history which also informs our work. Rosamund (2007) argues that curriculum as a focus of attention within comparative international studies research began during the 1990s, with work by Meyer, Kamens and Benavot (1992) revealing increased homogenization and standardization of the organization of primary school curricula, and Kamens, Meyer and Benavot (1996) shedding light upon similar processes in academic secondary education. Unlike Hopmann (1999), who focuses attention upon three types of curriculum discourses: political, administrative or 'programmatic', and 'practical' classroom levels, Rosamund (2007) seeks to make sense of curriculum change under broad global conditions. Rosamund (2007) refers to three rationales for curriculum change: 1) institutional discourse (education system); 2) political discourse – single national society; 3) political discourse – global society. While earlier distinctions reflect how curriculum-making has been traditionally understood as primarily a nation-state issue/dilemma, today we have to



understand national curriculum development in the context of global conditions, and how nation-states respond, adapt and position themselves in relation to these global processes.

Such global processes can be understood and critiqued within existing, more critical traditions. Within more traditional conceptions of curriculum, curriculum making can be seen as a rational response to global concerns about national economic competitiveness. By not problematizing these global developments as such, more technocratic, Tylerian (1949) instrumentalist notions of curriculum planning could be construed as justifying curriculum work as simply a more adaptive response to more global processes and pressures. From more critical traditions, however, the ideological dimensions of such global processes can be foregrounded; on such a rendering, Apple's (2004) work on ideology and curriculum, for example, can be rearticulated to critique the relationship between such social processes and schooling. From a more Foucauldian perspective of power/knowledge relationships, Popkewitz's (1991) work highlights curriculum as constitutive of power relations ascendant within such global discourses as these play out in curricula documents and programs, and their enactment. At a more national level, Rosamund's (2007) focus upon curriculum changes can be understood as 'a political measure that re-shapes relationships between individuals and institutions of the nation-state through the selection and organization of school knowledge' (p. 177).

An alternative, non-affirmative, praxis-oriented analytical approach

However, while shedding valuable light upon broader processes of curriculum reform, we do not believe these theorists give adequate attention to whether and how the content of curriculum reform processes are actually 'educational' for a better world. By 'educational' in this context, we mean that research on curriculum reform should be based upon, or at least include, a theory of education which foregrounds how a) the curriculum reform process itself is enacted *as* an educational process, and b) that the object of this curriculum reform process *is* education.

But what do we mean by actually mean by 'education' in a political democracy? To be understood as 'education' in such a democracy, opportunities must be provided to recognize somebody's experiences, and treat them seriously, but not necessarily 'affirm' these experiences – if by affirming we mean simply accepting a person's or an institutional interpretation of their experiences. *Non-affirmative* curriculum reform is about calling attention to, questioning, or problematizing contemporary practices, existing values, or knowledge (Uljens, 2015; Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017). The same is done in relation to future ideals. As with existing societal norms, future ideals, such as sustainable development, are taken seriously but questioned in order to create a reflective space for possible understandings. This is a creative, reflective space in which the learner comes to enhanced understandings about particular issues, in light of exposure to multiple possibilities. Under such conditions, specific norms and ideals are not simply affirmed. In a word, then, education is about *summoning* (German: *Aufforderung*) the learner to self-activity. This means that the educator as a moral practitioner takes a position, but in such a way that a reflexive space is co-constructed for the learner to establish or re-establish his or her own relationship to himself or herself, others, and the world. The learner's activity is then a form of *Bildsamkeit* – the activity the learner is involved in response to a pedagogical invitation. As *Bildsam* conventionally refers to that humans have a capacity to learn, in this context it refers to an engagement the individual has been invited to by the educator. Given this, education has beginnings and an ends, while the process of *Bildung* is lifelong (Uljens, 2002)

The principle of non-affirmative education is informed by notions of *recognition* (Honneth, 2003; Fraser & Honneth, 2003) – of both the self, and others. To *recognize* an



individual's potentiality means to accept their freedom or non-determinedness as a learner, but also to acknowledge their experiences, and empirical life-world. In addition, if we accept that the individual has the right to develop something like self-worth, self-esteem and self-awareness and that this depend on how the individual is received, this demands an ethical response. The educator is confronted with the fact that the self-development of the learner is related to how the learner is summoned (Uljens, 2002; Honneth, 2010; Ranciere, 2010). Thus educational development work is an *intervention* in the learner's relationship to himself or herself, other people, and the world (Benner 2015). The position acknowledges the necessity of the learner's own agency as a necessary requirement for transcending a given state.

These processes are true of not simply the relationship between a teacher and a student and learning in a classroom. They are equally valid in relation to the learning that occurs in relation to teachers' learning, the learning that occurs within institutions (e.g. schools), and leaders' learning. These processes are also true for the learning that occurs around curriculum development and production.

However, these non-affirming practices are always undertaken in situated circumstances, and take these circumstances into account. This questioning, and critique must be undertaken in such a way that leads to an open engagement with ideas and which makes for a better world. Such an approach is evident through various forms of deliberation, the development of various forms of communicative dialogue and action (Habermas, 1987), and in keeping with a broader approach to educational practice as praxis. Working from a more neo-Aristotelian approach to practice, Kemmis and Smith (2008) argue that praxis is a form of action oriented to improving people's lives, in the best traditions within a particular field. It is focused upon taking action, in the context of deliberating about what is best to do, under the circumstances:

Praxis is a particular kind of action. It is action that is *morally-committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field*. It is the kind of action people are engaged in when they think about what their action will mean *in the world*. Praxis is what people do when they take into account all the circumstances and exigencies that confront them at a particular moment and then, taking the broadest view they can of what it is *best* to do, they *act*. (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4; emphasis original).

In a more recent summation, Kemmis *et al.* (2014) argue praxis is 'action that aims for the good of those involved and for the good of human-kind' (p. 26). Such a standpoint advocates for changed circumstances, for a better world, and for individuals and groups as agents of productive change.

In a sense, the non-affirmative approach is an educational act that seeks to constitute such a praxis-oriented stance through the power of rational argument – education as enlightened dialogue. In this sense, it believes in the possibility of rationality. However, it doesn't imagine that it is somehow possible to escape political, social and cultural interests, to somehow 'bracket out' the conditions within which education is exercised; in this sense, the broader discourses (in a Foucauldian sense) that also simultaneously constitute society are also always simultaneously at play. Therefore, we would argue, a non-affirmative praxis-oriented approach to education could be construed as something of a 'middle-way' between illusionary emancipatory possibilities, and the broader processes of power that always and everywhere operate.

While there is a fine line between critical-transformative and non-affirmative positions, as Uljens and Ylimaki (2017) also argue, 'political democracy requires a specific form of critical curriculum and educational leadership, including a relative independence for

educational practitioners guaranteed by the political system itself' (p. 10). The extent of this relative independence is an issue of interest in relation to curriculum policy making in both the Finnish and Australian contexts. Policies and political conditions should not serve as predetermined constraints upon what is possible, but should instead establish conditions which enable teachers and students to engage productively with one another in processes of collaborative knowledge creation:

As a theoretical construct non-affirmativity asks to what extent a given practice or policy allows for teachers and learners to co-create spaces for critical reflection, not only to substitute one ideology with another. Although education is always political, the task of education is also to prepare for political participation the forms and aims of which are not determined in advance (p. 10).

A 'non-hierarchical' relationship is fostered through such an approach, such that education is not somehow simply subordinate to society or political interests. Rather, education operates within a sphere of relative independence with regard to such interests, even as it is always influenced by broader interests/conditions. A genuinely democratic education demands nothing less. In order to achieve these ends, and to create spaces for such thinking, it is necessary to have reflective educators, educational leaders and politicians. Such thinking requires that 'norms themselves must be brought into question for educational reasons.' On such understandings, norms 'are to be recognized, but not affirmed'; such a stance is necessary to foster pedagogical spaces within which 'for the learner to step back and see how ones-self relates to these' (ibid., p. 12). Such thinking keeps open the possibilities for education; while it recognizes and acknowledges particular understandings, values and ideals, these are not simply 'affirmed' without considered, critical reflection.

The data: Analyzing key policy documents – A comparative approach

The data informing the research, to which these conceptual resources are put to use, comprise key policy documents in each of the Australian and Finnish contexts. Specifically, this includes the *National Core Curriculum for Basic Education, 2014*, which comprises the principal curriculum policy document for Finland. In the Australian context, the *Australian Curriculum* exists in the form of various webpages supported through the federal Australian government's Department of Education and Training. These web resources are complemented by key teaching policy statements in the form of the National professional teaching standards *National Professional Standards for Teachers* (MCEECDYA, 2011), and the National Assessment Program, although these texts and programs are not the primary focus of our work here. A comparative analysis of the two sets of curriculum policy documents informs the analysis.

Analytically, for us, comparative educational research therefore entails close scrutiny of the content of these curriculum documents but in context. To be able to understand the relationship between the broader policy conditions, curricular development processes and the subsequent 'content' advocated in curriculum policy and associated documents, it is necessary to draw upon policy research, curriculum research, and education theory. Consequently, we seek to shed light upon how specific discourses operating at the national level relate to (including reflecting and challenging) broader global discourses/processes, and how they seek to engage with the local. However, in order to understand the nature of the primary curricula documents arising from this process (the 'curriculum' in a more traditional sense), and particularly the extent to which they genuinely foster engagement/dialogue and debate without simply advocating preconceived positions, we draw upon Dietrich Benner's notion of



education as ‘non-affirmative’ – as not simply ‘affirming’ a given position, without due regard for alternative viewpoints and dispositions. To focus attention upon how such processes also foster a more praxis-oriented stance – to make for a better world – through this dialogic process, we also draw upon notions of praxis (Kemmis & Smith, 2008; Kemmis et al, 2014). While broader analyses may provide some insights into the nature of curricula reforms under global conditions, closer analysis of the key texts arising from these policy processes, are essential for making any sort of informed judgment about the nature of the *educational* practices that seem to be supported discursively within nation-states – in this case Finland and Australia – and how these are similar and differ.

Results and discussion

Our analysis is informed by an exploration of the **content of the curriculum** as reflected in the a) specific aims, b) contents and c) methods advocated in key curriculum documents in Finland and Australia. We present our findings by firstly exploring these foci in relation to the Finnish case. This is followed by the Australian case. We then present a comparative analysis between the two countries in the subsequent section, prior to the conclusion.

Aims, contents and methods in the Finnish curriculum

Aims in the Finnish curriculum: Equality and local decision-making

As pointed out by Uljens & Rajakaltio (2017) in 2010, significant changes were made in the administration guidelines for special education which affirmed a number of basic principles including the early identification of risks and a three-step-support system for inclusive education. The supplementary documents to the national core curriculum further demonstrated a strong emphasis on diversity and equality in all aspects; sex, age, ethnicity and nationality, language, religion, conviction, opinion, health and disability. These values correspond to ambitions to create a safe and collaborative school community, enhancing all students’ well-being and meaningful learning, to be reached through differentiation and cooperation (National Board of Education 2010). These changes and amendments all became included in the national core curriculum 2014 (Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), 2014).

The curriculum also explicitly mentions the need to ensure balanced meals for students, and that educational provision will occur in accordance with anti-discrimination provisions, and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (including Declaration on Rights of the Child, and UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples). Key values thus include the ‘uniqueness of each pupil and the right to a good education’ (p. 31), ‘Humanity, general knowledge and ability, equality and democracy’ (p. 32), ‘cultural diversity as a richness’ (p. 33); ‘necessity of a sustainable way of living’ (p. 34). The curriculum is also explicit in outlining its ‘conception of learning’ as focused on students as active participants in their learning. Local perspectives and emphases that are seen to ‘complement the underlying values and conception of learning of basic education’ are also flagged as valued (p. 37).

Schools are also tasked with educational, social, cultural and futures-oriented aims and objectives (section 3). This includes processes of ensuring high quality educational experiences, equitable dispositions, cultural competence and appreciation, and approaching change positively and productively, and as a vehicle for national and international sustainability.

The new Finnish curriculum seeks to be responsive to concerns about both equality and quality. *Discourses of equality* are foregrounded in ways perhaps not evident in other national



curricula. This is apparent from the outset, in the way the curriculum frames the provision of an equitable and quality education:

The purpose of the steering of basic education is to ensure the equality and high quality of education and to create favorable conditions for the pupils' growth, development and learning. (FNBE, 2014, p. 16)

The Finnish curriculum begins with the importance of the local in relation to the national core curriculum in the first chapter, moving to the 'foundation of general knowledge and ability' in the second chapter. These foundations include the legislative framework (Basic Education Act) that informs the curriculum, the 'underlying values of basic education', the conception of learning informing the curriculum, and the nature of issues subject to local decision-making. The values, and the conception of learning as a collaborative process in which students are 'active learners' (p. 17) serve as the center-piece of the chapter. The values focus upon: the importance of the uniqueness of each student and their right to a good education; humanity, general knowledge and ability, equality and democracy; cultural diversity as richness; and the necessity of a sustainable way of living. Within these values, the focus upon 'humanity, general knowledge and ability, equality and democracy' provide the opportunity for a more non-affirmative approach to ethics education in its aspirations for education. Education shall not demand or lead to religious, philosophical or political commitment of the pupils. The school and education may not be used as channels of commercial influence (p. 16).

Foregrounding local decision making

The challenges of responding to the provision of education are explicit from the early stages of the principal curriculum text, which also frames the need for changes to education provision to be better responsive to the world in which schools are situated:

The normative part of the steering system comprises the Basic Education Act and Decree, Government Decrees, the National Core Curriculum, and the local curriculum and annual plans of individual schools based on it. Various parts of this system are being updated to ensure that changes in the world around the school can be responded to and that the school's role in building a sustainable future can be strengthened in the organization of education. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 16)

There is also an element of 'steering' through the core curriculum, and that is framed as necessary for more equitable educational provision:

The purpose of the core curriculum is to support and steer the provision of education and school work and to promote the equal implementation of comprehensive and single-structure basic education (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 16)

However, at the same time, it is striking how the Finnish curriculum foregrounds local decision-making and planning in relation to the curriculum. The new Finnish curriculum begins with a section entitled 'The significance of local curricula and the local curriculum process.' It explicitly states that the local curriculum is imperative for enacting various 'national targets' and 'goals', as well as responding to issues of local concern. It also acts as a connector between the schools and other individuals and groups focused on providing services for children's growth and development:



The local curriculum is an important part of the steering of education. It plays a key role in setting out and implementing both national targets and goals and tasks considered important locally. The local curriculum lays a common foundation for and points the direction to daily school work. It is a strategic and pedagogical tool that defines the policies for the education provider's operation and the work carried out by the schools. The curriculum links the operation of the schools to other local activities aiming to promote the well-being and learning of children and young people. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 17).

In this way, the local is explicitly privileged in much of the early documentation that attends the Finnish curriculum, and that this is a valued aim is evident in the relatively extensive documentation about its importance in the early parts of the main curriculum document (FNBE, 2014).

Methods and content: Transversal competences

However, of much more significance is what are described as the 'Transversal Competences' outlined in the curriculum. These refer to various competences that 'cross the boundaries of and link different fields of knowledge and skills', and which are seen as essential for students' current and future growth and learning, including for civic, social and economic development (p. 44). These competences are: competence as objectives for learning defined in the Finnish national core curriculum are delineated as follows (FNBE 2014):

- Thinking and learning to learn
- Cultural competence, interaction and self-expression
- Taking care of oneself and others, managing daily life
- Multiliteracy
- Competence in information and communication technology (ICT)
- Working life competence and entrepreneurship
- Participation, involvement and building a sustainable future.

Explicit mention is made of these transversal competences in relation to local decision making.

To operationalize these transversal competences, educators are asked to consider:

- What are the perspectives that may complement the mission of basic education and that are manifest in its practical implementation;
- What are the potential local emphases of the transversal competence areas defined in the core curriculum, and how are these emphases manifested in practice...;
- What are the arrangements and measures by which the achievement of transversal competence objectives in education is ensured and monitored? (FNBE, 2014, p. 56)

Accepting the above transversal competencies reflect partly a Europeanisation process as they correspond with those eight key-competencies advanced by European Union from more than a decade ago:

- Communication in the mother tongue
- Communication in foreign languages



- Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- Digital competence
- Learning to learn
- Social and civic competences
- Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship (Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006)

The movement towards emphasizing general objectives instead of subject-matter teaching is a fairly dramatic shift in the Finnish education culture, including teacher education, and especially since teacher education for primary/lower and upper secondary school have been solely centered around subjects. Typically, a teacher for these grades has been teaching two subjects each, of which one was the major. Now the schools face the question about to what extent teaching in a school subject supports the learner's development with respect to the key competencies above. The policy movement towards emphasizing more holistic transversal competencies invites collaborative teacher practices, which also forces teacher education to rework its approaches.

Accepting general competences as guiding aims require cooperation across school subjects, including making use of various kinds of integrative working methods. Instead of a general part expressing aims and a specific part communicating information about subjects, a feature of this new curriculum was, therefore, an integrated approach to curriculum development. The objectives in the subject syllabi include competence goals. An explicit intention of the FNBE group leading this policy work was to promote collaborative teaching. This was enhanced by bringing about multi-disciplinary learning modules (Uljens & Rajakaltio, 2017).

At the same time, in our interpretation, the Finnish curriculum policy promotes more of a Bildung oriented curriculum for four reasons, and the curriculum is not simply treated as a 'compilation' of general competencies per se:

- a) The transversal competencies are not the only general objectives explicated in the curriculum, but are complemented by an individually-centered way of communicating the aims of schooling;
- b) The transversal competencies are clearly elaborated in relation to specific subject matter contents;
- c) Evaluation procedures do not focus students' abilities regarding transversal competencies but rather assess students' knowledge and understanding in subject matter;
- d) National evaluation of student success apply sample-based methods thereby not having schools compete against each other. Teachers are also allowed the degrees of freedom to adopt teaching to the individual students' interests and needs.

In this way, the transversal competences are key vehicles for reform, but they do not exist in isolation of a more holistic, and subject-informed approach to learning.

Methods and content: Integrative teaching and multidisciplinary

In relation to teaching methods and content, integrative and multidisciplinary instructional approaches are also advocated within the new curriculum. Various 'real-world' themes are encouraged as vehicles for such approaches. Schools must provide at least one multidisciplinary learning module each year, and teaching approaches must reflect this multidisciplinary approach. These modules are seen as providing opportunities to achieve the goals of basic education, and 'in particular, the development of transversal competences' (p. 73). Furthermore, topics are planned locally, and reflective of the principles of school culture



outlined in section 4.2. The transversal competences are also seen as a direct outcome of these multidisciplinary approaches; this is evident in how the links between school culture, multidisciplinary learning modules and transversal competences are explicitly outlined (see diagram p. 75).

The *municipalities* are particularly important in the work of curriculum enactment, as they are responsible for making decisions on a variety of issues relating to teaching methods and content, including:

- How the education provider and schools promote and evaluate the implementation of the principles of the school culture; which are the potential local emphases and how are they manifested in practice...;
- The local goals and special questions that guide the selection, use and development of learning environments and working methods...;
- How integrative instruction is implemented in practice;
- How multidisciplinary learning modules are implemented;
- The local goals that guide implementation...;
- The principles and methods that guide implementation (for example, whether decisions on the topics of multidisciplinary learning modules are made in a joint local curriculum while the more detailed objectives and contents are described in a school-specific curriculum or annual plan, or whether some other method is followed; how it can be ensured that the studies of each pupil include at least one multidisciplinary learning module in each school year; what type of instructions are issued concerning the scope of the learning modules, how the subjects included in the modules at any one time are selected; how the pupils' participation in their planning is organized ...);
- Objectives and contents (defined either in the curriculum or in the annual plan as decided by the education provider);
- Assessment practices (how to ensure that working skills and other competencies demonstrated in the modules are taken into account in the assessment of subjects that are part of the module implementation) and;
- Monitoring, evaluation and development of the implementation. (p. 77)

A range of 'issues subject to local decision' (p. 106) are also outlined in the national curriculum and pertain to the relations between school providers (municipalities) and schools. These include in relation to: the organization of the school day; various disciplinary discussions and measures; distance learning; grade-independent studies; multi-grade instruction; flexible basic education; instruction in particular situations (e.g. hospitals, prisons); and, other activities supporting the goals of education (pp. 107-110).

Methods and content: Collaborative curriculum work

There is also a focus upon engagement and cooperation amongst educators in the provision of the local curriculum:

Cooperation in the preparation of the curriculum and annual plan promotes commitment to shared goals and the coherence of instruction and education. The education provider shall ensure that the education personnel have possibilities for taking part in this cooperation and promote both cooperation between subjects and multiprofessional cooperation between various groups of actors. These opportunities for participation will be ensured regardless of the manner in which the curriculum is prepared. (FNBE, 2014, p. 19-20)

Significantly, explicit mention is also made that opportunities for curriculum development and related plans ‘must also be provided for the pupils’ (p. 20). In effect, because of the way in which the Finnish constitution is framed, the municipalities are held responsible as the ‘education provider’ described within the curriculum documents.

Methods and content: Developing school culture - a broadened notion of methods

‘School development’ processes are considered key to the enactment of these competences, and the new national curriculum more broadly. The operation culture of schools is considered key to the educational experiences of students:

The school culture plays a key role in implementing comprehensive basic education. It always affects the quality of school work as experienced by the pupils. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 58)

School cultural development is construed as necessitating ongoing interaction with all members of the community:

The clearest manifestations of the school culture are found in the community’s practices. In basic education, all practices are geared to supporting the goals set for the educational work. The school culture must support commitment to the goals and objectives and promote the realization of the shared underlying values and conception of learning in school work. The basic precondition for developing the school culture is open and interactive discussion that is characterized by respect for others, ensures the participation of all members of the community, and inspires trust. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, p. 59).

Several key principles are identified as guiding the development of school culture. These relate to the cultivation of schools as learning communities, emphasizing well-being and safety in daily life, a versatile approach to cultivating learning, advocacy of cultural diversity and languages, opportunities for democratic action, equity and equality, and environmental sustainability:

- A learning community at the heart of the school culture. This entails provision of an environment in which all can learn;
- Well-being and safety in daily life. This includes preventing discrimination;
- Interaction and versatile working approach. There is a focus on flexibility and experimentation in learning environments and approaches;
- Cultural diversity and language awareness. There is a valuing of multiculturalism and multi-lingualism;
- Participation and democratic action. The community fosters participation and democratic dialogue amongst all participants;
- Equity and equality. Diversity and difference are valued;
- Environmental responsibility and sustainable future orientation. Specific practices and values are altered to foster improved environmental stewardship. (Finnish National Board of Education, 2014, pp. 60-65)

There is also a focus upon engagement and cooperation amongst educators in the provision of the local curriculum.



The Australian curriculum - Aims, methods and contents

Aims of the Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum also seeks to provide the opportunity to foster learning in a myriad of ways, and through a progression of learning opportunities through schooling. The values of the curriculum are evident in advocacy for successful learning, informed citizens, and this is to occur through a specific curriculum program from Foundation to Year 10:

The Australian Curriculum is designed to develop successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. It is presented as a progression of learning from Foundation-Year 10 that makes clear to teachers, parents, students and others in the wider community what is to be taught, and the quality of learning expected of young people as they progress through school (ACARA, n.d(a)).

At the same time, a senior secondary curriculum is supported that has been endorsed by the Education Council – the council of federal, state and territory education Ministers – with fifteen senior secondary subjects endorsed across English, Mathematics, Science, and Humanities and Social Sciences.

The Australian Curriculum also seeks to engage with all students as learners, and includes explicit attention to equity as construed in relation to geographic local and ‘background’ status:

The Australian Curriculum sets the expectations for what all Australian students should be taught, regardless of where they live or their background. (ACARA, n.d(b))

There is also some attention given to the importance of local direction and organization of learning, with schools and teachers construed as responsible for the organization of learning, in relation to the needs of their specific students:

Schools and teachers are responsible for the organization of learning and they will choose contexts for learning and plan learning in ways that best meet their students’ needs and interests. (ACARA, n.d.(c))

However, this equity principle is also problematized by the ambiguity that surrounds how nation-states seek to provide education for their citizens. The curriculum explicitly states a need to ensure ‘access to the same content’, and ‘consistent national standards’. On the one hand, this statement could be taken as evidence of efforts to ensure educational provision of an appropriate quality is available to all. However, at the same time, such a stance also reflects a more ‘controlling’ ‘consistent’ approach, at the national level, that may limit how states and individual schools seek to actually enact the curriculum in ways responsive to their particular circumstances.

More recent reforms to the Australian Curriculum have led to a stronger focus upon issues about equity, described as ‘diversity.’ In more recent iterations, a broadly inclusive ethos is evident:

ACARA is committed to the development of a high-quality curriculum for all Australian students, one that promotes excellence and equity in education. All students

are entitled to rigorous, relevant and engaging learning programs drawn from a challenging curriculum that addresses their individual learning needs.

Teachers will use the Australian Curriculum to develop teaching and learning programs that build on students' interests, strengths, goals and learning needs, and address the cognitive, affective, physical, social and aesthetic needs of all students (ACARA, n.d.(d))

These aims are also made in the context of explicit reference to the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People (MCEETYA, 2008), which provided the policy framework for the Australian curriculum and referred explicitly to the need for Australian schooling to promote equity and excellence (goal 1), and to enable all students to become 'successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens' (goal 2).

Methods and Contents: Competencies as Capabilities in the Australian curriculum

The Australian Curriculum also refers to seven general capabilities which arose out of the MCEETYA process (MCEETYA, 2008): literacy; numeracy; information and communication technology; critical and creative thinking; personal and social capability; ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding. General capabilities are described as being addressed through the learning areas (English, mathematics; science, humanities and social sciences, arts, technologies, health and physical education, languages) particularly where they are referred to and applied in specific content descriptions within each learning area, and where these descriptions are further elaborated (described as 'content elaborations').

The general capabilities are organized into three sections: an introduction outlining the nature of the capability and its relationship to the learning areas; various organizing elements that undergird a learning continuum; and a learning continuum that outlines the nature of the knowledge, skills, behaviors and dispositions students should be developing at specific stages of their schooling.

The general capabilities are described as being elaborated through each of the learning areas, and assessed where appropriate. In relation to literacy, a broad-based approach is taken, focusing upon communicating in school and beyond:

In the Australian Curriculum, students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. Literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

Similarly, for numeracy, the curriculum is construed more broadly as a vehicle to cultivate capacity with numbers:

In the Australian Curriculum, students become numerate as they develop the knowledge and skills to use mathematics confidently across other learning areas at school and in their lives more broadly. Numeracy encompasses the knowledge, skills, behaviours and dispositions that students need to use mathematics in a wide range of situations. It involves students recognising and understanding the role of mathematics in the world and having the dispositions and capacities to use mathematical knowledge and skills purposefully. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

ICTs are also seen as productive vehicles for learning both within and beyond school:

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability as they learn to use ICT effectively and appropriately to access, create and communicate information and ideas, solve problems and work collaboratively in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school. ICT capability involves students learning to make the most of the digital technologies available to them, adapting to new ways of doing things as technologies evolve and limiting the risks to themselves and others in a digital environment. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

The capacity to engage in critical and creative thinking is framed as drawing upon and developing practices and processes of logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation:

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop capability in critical and creative thinking as they learn to generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives and solve problems. Critical and creative thinking involves students thinking broadly and deeply using skills, behaviours and dispositions such as reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

Personal and social capability is also construed as a broad-ranging activity, involving students modulating their emotions, being empathetic, developing positive relationships, being responsible, working in teams, responding effectively to difficult circumstances, and fostering leadership skills:

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. Personal and social capability involves students in a range of practices including recognizing and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

Ethical understanding is similarly wide-ranging, entailing understandings of context, tension and uncertainty. Principles of honesty, resilience, empathy and respect, outlined in the earlier Melbourne Declaration, are also promoted:

Ethical understanding involves students building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others. It does this through fostering the development of ‘personal values and attributes such as honesty, resilience, empathy and respect for others’, and the capacity to act with ethical integrity, as outlined in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA 2008, p. 9). (ACARA, n.d.(e))

Finally, in relation to intercultural understanding, the curriculum advocated opportunities for students to reflect upon their own culture, and that of others. The multifaceted

nature of different cultures is supported, as is engagement with diverse cultures, and the development of connections and respect for difference:

In the Australian Curriculum, students develop intercultural understanding as they learn to value their own cultures, languages and beliefs, and those of others. They come to understand how personal, group and national identities are shaped, and the variable and changing nature of culture. Intercultural understanding involves students learning about and engaging with diverse cultures in ways that recognize commonalities and differences, create connections with others and cultivate mutual respect. (ACARA, n.d.(e))

Again, these general capabilities are all described as to be addressed within the content of the specific learning areas that comprise the curriculum.

Methods and Contents: Cross-curriculum priorities in the Australian curriculum

The cross-curriculum priorities are similarly described as arising from the original Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008), and focus upon three areas that ‘need to be addressed for the benefit of both individuals and Australia as a whole’ (ACARA, n.d.(f)).

The Australian cross-curriculum priorities reflect the specific Australian context –and are quite different from Finnish curricula policy reforms. This includes attention to Indigenous knowledges and cultures, Australia’s engagement with Asia, and issues of sustainability. Again, these are to be addressed through the specific learning areas/subjects:

The Australian Curriculum also includes three current cross-curriculum priorities that are to be developed, where relevant, through the learning areas. These are: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures; Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia; and Sustainability. The priorities are not separate subjects in themselves; they are addressed through learning area content, where appropriate, and identified by icons. A set of organising ideas that reflect the essential knowledge, understanding and skills has been developed for each cross-curriculum priority (ACARA, n.d. (f)).

The cross-curriculum priorities are described as dimensions that enable rich insights into each of the priorities, at the same time as they enhance learning through the learning areas, and enable engagement between learning areas:

The priorities provide national, regional and global dimensions which will enrich the curriculum through development of considered and focused content that fits naturally within learning areas. They enable the delivery of learning area content at the same time as developing knowledge, understanding and skills relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures, Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia or Sustainability. Incorporation of the priorities will encourage conversations between learning areas and between students, teachers and the wider community. (ACARA, n.d.(f))

In relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) histories and cultures, students are described as having the opportunity to develop their understandings and knowledge of Australia through engaging with A&TSI perspectives, and this in turn will enable them to productively understand contemporary A&TSI communities:

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures priority provides opportunities for all students to deepen their knowledge of Australia by engaging with the world's oldest continuous living cultures. Through the Australian Curriculum, students will understand that contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are strong, resilient, rich and diverse. (ACARA, n.d.(f)).

Furthermore, explicit mention is made about how this might be achieved in relation to each learning area. In English, for example, literature is construed as a key source to inform students:

In the Australian Curriculum: English, students begin to engage with the priority as they develop an awareness and appreciation of, and respect for, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature. This includes storytelling traditions (oral narrative) and contemporary literature. Students will learn to develop respectful, critical understandings of the social, historical and cultural contexts associated with different uses of language features and text structures including images and visual language. (ACARA, n.d.(g))

This priority is also developed around three key concepts which encourage students to develop better understandings of Indigenous connections to country/place and the belief systems that inform this relationship; the diversity of A&TSI peoples' cultures through engagement with 'language, ways of life and experiences as expressed through historical, social and political lenses', and; the rich variety of kinship structures and contributions of Indigenous peoples at local, national and global scales (ACARA, n.d.(f)).

In relation to 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia', students are construed as being provided the opportunity 'to celebrate the social, cultural, political and economic links that connect Australia with Asia' (ACARA, n.d.(f)). They are encouraged to be 'Asian-literate', and to 'develop knowledge and understanding of Asian societies, cultures, beliefs and environments' (ACARA, n.d.(f)), as well as the connections between peoples in Asia, Australia and the remainder of the world: 'Asia literacy provides students with the skills to communicate and engage with the peoples of Asia so they can effectively live, work and learn in the region.' (ACARA, n.d.(f)). Within this priority, the three concepts through which this priority will be developed through an understanding of the diversity of peoples, countries and environments in this part of the world; historical and ongoing achievements of peoples of Asia, and; past and ongoing links between Australia and Asia.

In relation to 'Sustainability', the focus is upon developing within students 'an appreciation of the necessity of acting for a more sustainable future and so address the ongoing capacity of Earth to maintain all life and meet the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations' (ACARA, n.d.(f)). The first key concept through which the priority will be developed is through the exploration of 'the interdependent and dynamic nature of systems that support all life on Earth as well as the promotion of healthy social, economic and ecological patterns of living for our collective wellbeing and survival' (ACARA, n.d.(f)). The second concept calls for an understanding of sustainability in a global context, and the discussion of a variety of perspectives on 'ecosystems, values and social justice' (ACARA, n.d.(f)). The third concept relates to developing the ability to engage in reflective thinking to help foster empowerment of students 'to design action that will lead to a more equitable, respectful and sustainable future' (ACARA, n.d.(f)).

Discussion: A non-affirmative, praxis-oriented conception of Education?

Curriculum aims: Equity and responsiveness to context

In relation to the aims of the curricula more broadly, within both curricula, issues of equity are apparent. If we look carefully at the discursive presentation of the Australian curriculum, from the outset, there is clear evidence of an equity-informed approach to teaching practice. However, arguably, the conception of equity is also one that construes the Australian Curriculum as ‘set[ing] the expectations for what all Australian students should be taught, regardless of where they live or their background’ (ACARA, n.d(b)), and this reflects a potentially homogenising approach, particularly in relation to geographic locations, and their background. In part, such an approach can be construed as reflective of broader homogenizing influence of ‘fast-policy’ (Peck & Theodore, 2015), neoliberal logics, which fail to take context adequately into account. While a more holistic understanding of diversity appears evident in the further elaboration of the aims of the Australian Curriculum, particularly in relation to ‘diversity’, whether such diversity is recognized sufficiently from the outset is a moot point. Furthermore, the concurrent influence of test-based accountability in the context of NAPLAN testing has made it difficult to enact more context-responsive approaches and foci, which effectively challenge these more responsive possibilities (Polesel, Rice & Dulfer, 2014).

At the same time, the Finnish Curriculum is expected to be strongly connected to local contexts of community, and of efforts to cultivate circumstances which are conducive to the individual reaching knowledge and understanding through their own inquiry and uncoerced learning. The more extended elaboration of the nature and importance of local contexts is indicative of tighter relations between the national and the municipal levels of government in Finland, which are much looser, albeit increasingly ‘national’ in orientation in relation to the federal and state governments in Australia. This is not surprising, given the states are principally responsible for education in Australia, rather than the federal government. Nevertheless, a more non-affirmative educative stance is evident in the Finnish context is the way in which the curricula value and validate local circumstances and conditions for learning; local decision-making processes appear to be foregrounded much more in the Finnish context. This is a clear manifestation of the value and significance of community in relation to schooling processes, and reflected in the mutually recursive way in which school-community relations are constituted: ‘The curriculum links the operation of the schools to other local activities aiming to promote the well-being and learning of children and young people’ (FNBE, 2014, p. 17). This manifestation of the local is also evidence in how school cultural development is explicitly promoted as crucial to the enactment of the curriculum. Again, however, constitutional differences are important here. In Australia, education is the responsibility of the individual states, with the Commonwealth/federal government providing additional (typically tied) funding to those areas it deems most important (most recently, in relation to literacy and numeracy, STEM education, and languages). In contrast, in Finland, local municipalities are responsible for the provision of education, supported by the national government.

In the Australian context, this focus upon the ‘local’ is evident in advocacy by teachers to ‘choose contexts for learning and plan learning in ways that best meet their students’ needs and interests’. (ACARA, n.d.(c)). Such approaches have the potential to be sufficiently open to enable the possibilities for teachers to engage with students about what these learning experiences might be. However, the focus upon how to ‘best meet their students’ needs and interest’ could also imply a more passive approach on the part of students, with teachers as the ‘decision-makers’ about what these learning experiences should look like. The way in



which teachers are openly constituted as ‘responsible for the organization of learning’, and that they ‘will choose contexts for learning’ betrays a much more prescriptive and directive approach. While it may be possible to challenge such circumstances through how teachers enact the curriculum, these potentialities, arguably, should also be evident within the curriculum as expressed in policy documents, and not simply left to the good will and professional capacity of teachers and principals. The extent to which students are provided with the opportunity for a more ‘summonsing’ to learning approach is reflected in efforts to recognize their experiences but whether and how this is sufficient for a more non-affirmative approach is perhaps open to question.

In relation to comparative studies, and contextual influences more broadly, while the aims of the curricula can be related ‘horizontally’ – in relation to policy-borrowing and lending, and ‘vertically’ – in relation to national and more local responses to globalized policy discourses (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), it appears that in the Australian curriculum policy context more broadly, there has not been substantive borrowing around focusing upon ‘the local’. While the Finnish focus upon context as a ‘leading’ comparator country could provide hints into what the aims of a productive educational system might look like, there is perhaps less evidence of such policy learning about what is occurring in other countries with a more explicitly local-orientation (such as Finland) from the Australian side.

That the municipalities are the educational ‘providers’ in Finland, rather than the states as in Australia, is a significant difference between the two contexts, and enables a more context-responsive approach in the Finnish case. However, this more context-responsive approach may also be threatened by increased centralization in the Finnish case. If decision-making is decentralised, in the hands of the municipalities, this is impossible to control. This concern about control is arguably a reason for more recentralisation processes that have also occurred most recently in Finland – and that seek to reclaim control, via processes of ‘steering at a distance’ (Kickert, 1995). Increased control also has the potential to reduce the efficacy of educators at more local levels, potentially reducing the capacity for substantial reform at the local level. Nevertheless, the discursive focus upon the local at the level of the principal curriculum document guiding educational reform in Finland also gives confidence that this ‘localness’ may not be easily relinquished.

Curricula content and methods: Competencies and cross-curriculum priorities

In relation to the curriculum content in each context, the transversal competencies (Finland) and cross-curriculum priorities (Australia) reflect what is valued in the current curricula in each nation-state. The OECD (2006) competences are strongly reflected in both national contexts, reflecting how more economic logics exert influence internationally, constituting what might be described as a neoliberal imaginary, and a global education policy field (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The way in which the curriculum acts as a tool for governing educational practice is evident through the particular conception of Education that it promotes. And the conception of education promoted in each of the curricula presented here is a multifarious and at times contested, reflecting the multifarious foci and influences upon the curriculum-making, and curriculum-taking process in and across national contexts. In some ways, these competing foci have contributed to cultivating the conditions for a non-affirmative, more praxis-oriented conception of education, but in other ways, these conditions themselves challenge the possibility of more substantive, non-affirmative, praxis-oriented stances through the curricula.

In a sense, the foregrounding of the ‘competences’ and ‘general capabilities’ within the respective curricula reflect the more neoliberal positioning of education, and a new concept of the self-managing, active ‘citizen’ with entrepreneurial perspectives. Pedagogically,



however, education has always tried to promote capacities beyond the learning of specific content. The development of more general capacities ('transversal competences' in the Finnish context) is reflected in a broader subject matter oriented didaktik tradition, including a focus upon how to provide the conditions for productive student learning more broadly, beyond curriculum 'subjects'. Competencies only come to play in terms and as related to specific contents. Arguably, in the Australian context, and from a broader critical tradition informing curriculum studies, the focus upon 'capabilities' and 'cross-curricula priorities' is also reflective of a conception of education that seeks to work across disciplinary knowledges. There is a particular focus upon marginalized understandings and perspectives within dominant knowledge domains – such as a focus upon sustainability (including environmental sustainability), indigenous ways of knowing (ontologies and epistemologies), and engagement with diverse cultures (including in relation to Australia's geographical location as an Asian-Pacific country), which again is not very much at the fore in the Finnish curriculum.

Arguably, both curricula attempt to provide, and reflect, the sorts of circumstances for a non-affirmative, praxis-oriented conception of curricula development and enactment in how they keep these possibilities open. Both the general capabilities and transversal competences are described as being developed through the various learning areas/subjects in their respective contexts, and these are not prescribed. The curriculum in each country does appear to display evidence of a summons to self-activity (Fichte), which in turn has the potential to enable the development of the child/student, such that she/he is able to reach consciousness of her own self-development – her freedom to act. This is at least partially evident in the way in which teachers are encouraged to foster the circumstances within which students come to develop particular transversal competences and general capabilities.

The content of the two curricula reveal some of these competences/capabilities seem to share common traits/characteristics, and some of these common foci may provide the opportunity for a more open conception of education which is not restricted to particular ways and means. The competence of 'thinking and learning to learn (T1)' seems to resonate with the general capability of 'critical and creative thinking' and retain possibilities for more summonsing-to-self activities. Similarly, the focus upon enhanced cultural comprehension is evident in the 'cultural competence, interaction and self-expression (T2)', and the general capability of 'ethical understanding and cultural understanding'. 'Taking care of oneself and managing daily life' (T3) has some resonances with the 'personal and social capability'. These also all seem not to foreclose upon particular ways of understanding students' place in the world.

However, there are also important differences. The 'multiliteracy' (T4) competency in the Finnish context seems to foreground a richer and more cross-curricula approach than the support for the three discrete general capabilities which appear to be most closely affiliated in the Australian case: literacy, numeracy and ICTs. Students are certainly constituted as responsive to a particular kind of summons to self-activity, but, in the Australian case, this appears to be dominated by broader conceptions of these capabilities as necessary 'work-ready' capacities. The federal government's revisions of the curriculum, and its subsequent emphasis upon 'back to basics' provides further evidence of a more instrumentalist approach to education, and a desire to increasingly ensure that schooling serves the immediate interests of industry, even as the focus upon 'innovation' within the broader political realm simultaneously gestures towards the difficulty of actually doing so.

However, the Finnish focus upon 'working life competence and entrepreneurship' also clearly resonate strongly with more working life-oriented approach. In this case, the market logic arguably, moves to the foreground, while cultural and historical understandings are more marginalized. While earlier, the role of the school was to constitute the nation, and

citizenship, this appears to have been challenged and perhaps marginalized. More instrumental approaches to schools and schooling, reflective of economic logics, but not of a more reflexive disposition of concern for sustainable world – a world worth living in (Kemmis et al, 2014) – have exerted increasing influence, even as religious, cultural and broader historical circumstances are evident. However, again, that the Finnish competences are not only explicitly elaborated through the general objectives explicated in the curriculum, but are complemented by a more individually-focused way of communicating the aims of schooling, and the way in which they are strongly elaborated in relation to the content of specific subject matter, also helps reduce the potentially reductive impact, and a more problematic ‘affirmative’ economic rendering of schooling.

Arguably, more instrumentalist sensibilities are evident in relation to the Australian cross-curricula priorities. While working life competence and entrepreneurship (T6) may reflect more economic logics in the absence of sufficient focus upon situating the competencies within the curriculum as a whole, such logics are reflected in those more economic features of the push for Australian students to engage with Asia. In the Australian context, this push to promote engagement with Asia is certainly undertaken to enhance intercultural understanding and appreciation with Australia’s neighbors. However, it is also undertaken to enhance broader strategic (e.g. Singapore military training in Australia with Australian troops), political (e.g. Indonesia as the largest democratic Muslim country in the world) and economic alliances (e.g. with China as the biggest customer for Australian mineral resources). Such responses could be seen as important ways of stabilizing international relations, and in this way, could be construed as promoting a form of practice as praxis – practice as concerned with enhancing circumstances for not only individuals, but the wider world. However, this potentiality could be rendered more strongly in the Australian case, to challenge foreclosing upon more economic and political renderings of what students ‘should know’. A more non-affirmative approach is certainly challenged by more emphatic emphases upon advocacy for particular kinds of strategic, political and economic alliances that the current government might feel should be cultivated in schooling through the curriculum, for broader social, political and economic purposes.

At the same time, participation, involvement and building a sustainable future (T7) does resonate strongly with the cross-curriculum priority of sustainability, and here, arguably, more overtly praxis-oriented concerns about how to reduce environmental pollution and destruction are much more evident (Kemmis et al, 2014). The promotion of ‘environmental stewardship’ (National Board of Education, 2014, pp. 60-65) is similarly evidence of a more praxis-oriented approach. And the advocacy for various Integrative and multidisciplinary instructional approaches in the Finnish curriculum could serve as a useful vehicle for cultivating a focus upon education for sustainability more broadly. Indeed, these integrative and multidisciplinary instructional approaches seem to provide the opportunity to develop more genuinely non-affirmative approaches, as students are called to potentially identify the nature of the sorts of sustainability practices they wish to explore, and/or particular industries or human activities to which more sustainable practices would seem increasingly important, indeed vital. The way in which the transversal competences are also construed as necessary for cultivating students’ civic, social and economic development (p. 44) is also evidence of the explicit linking of broader community processes and schooling for the generation of a more praxis-oriented disposition.

An important point of distinction between the two curricula is evident in relation to Indigenous knowledges and traditions. Reflecting ongoing concerns about both Indigenous participation in education, and broader tensions about the relationship between Indigenous and dominant knowledge traditions in Australia, the Australian Curriculum foregrounds the



place of such knowledges through its advocacy for a panoply of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. The way in which students are to develop better understandings of Indigenous' perspectives and approaches to country/place, the rich variety of different Indigenous cultures, languages and experiences, and the diversity of kinship structures, and of Indigenous contributions at local, national and global levels all reflect much more praxis oriented approach to education as not only oriented towards the development of the individual, but of the broader society more generally. In Finland the Sami culture and language is acknowledged but not in the same explicit way as in Australia.

The influence of varying approaches to evaluation

Another important point of distinction pertains to evaluation, which has particular effects upon the nature of the curriculum developed and subsequently enacted. In a centralized evaluation-centric political culture, as in Australia at present, where there is so much focus upon reductive accounts of students' numeracy and literacy capacities (Polesel et al, 2014; Comber, 2012; Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013), how teachers respond to the invitation to teach as outlined in the curriculum, is limited by these broader policy conditions. While, in many ways, the Australian Curriculum seems to provide teachers with the latitude to decide how best to teach their students – thereby seeming to preserve teachers' professional autonomy and independence of practice – the conditions within which this curriculum is enacted serve as a counter to these freedoms. Because teachers are responsive to national testing pressures, even as they may deny the influence of these pressures (Hardy, 2014; Lingard, Thompson & Sellar, 2016), the decisions they make are affected by these circumstances. In this respect the Finnish education system, including curriculum and assessment, represents perhaps a better balance – the absence of an evaluation-centric approach provide the teachers with opportunities to reconstruct educative spaces more from the perspective of students interests. Teachers are empowered with an influence over evaluation.

In a sense, in Australia, assessment practices are reflective of the 'social efficiency' argument of Deng and Luke (2008), while aspects of the curriculum are reflective of a variety of approaches, including more 'social reconstructionist' approaches (such as in relation to advocacy for sustainability, better understanding of Indigenous issues, and Australia's place in Asia). 'Academic rationalism' is reflected in the Finnish context (Deng & Luke, 2008) through not as strongly as in the Australian one. Yet, as assessment is mainly focused on students learning of the content taught, this is perhaps in tension with the transversal competences. Even as the 'didaktik tradition' is also clearly prevalent and evident, arguably, more 'social efficiency' approaches are also evident, through the advocacy of some competences, perhaps most obviously related to entrepreneurship. This is not to ignore that more 'social reconstructionist' approaches continue to be evident, with their emphasis upon equity – witness the explicit reference to such concerns from the outset of the Basic Education Curriculum. In Australia, it has only been more recently that concerns have been expressed about doing more to address the needs of lower performing students, as indicated in NAPLAN – revealing ourselves as engaging in more social reconstructionist, praxis-oriented approach, even as the evidence used to advocate for such a position is more reductive (i.e. standardized test results)! This is one of many tensions in the relations between policy, curriculum and evaluation. More economic issues are reflected through 'social efficiency' while more political ideals are established through 'social reconstructionism', while a more 'open future' is evident through 'humanist' ideals (while the 'academic rationalist' position is reflective of the cultural conservative reproductive approach (and also potentially neo-nationalist and conservative).

Also the way in which the Australian Curriculum is presented through the ACARA website reflects how a focus on evaluation is immediately evident in relation to the curriculum. The very name of the organization – Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority – together with the recent history of test-based accountability practices in the Australian context makes it difficult to construe the Australian Curriculum as strongly grounded in principles of education other than those associated with assessment. In many ways, the specific learnings about the importance of context that have been promulgated in the Finnish case, including skepticism about international comparator surveys, and processes of ‘international spectacle’ and ‘mutual accountability’ (Simola, 2005) do not appear discursively in the relation to the Australian Curriculum policy settings, and this is evident in the relations between standardized testing and curriculum in Australia. Rather than challenging the more decontextualized logics, and more reductive comparative logics that reduce schooling to test scores on national and international tests, key Australian Curriculum policy texts seem to overlook such foci, even as they spend relatively less time and attention focusing sufficiently upon local circumstances.

In a way, the most recent Finnish curriculum is also more centralized. First, it does encourage certain teaching method in ways that has not been the case before. These teaching methods are now a topic within the curriculum, with some professional teaching associations perceiving such statements as an imposition upon the work of teachers. The focus upon ‘phenomenon-based’ teaching, for example, is prescribed in ways that were not previously the case. Second, instead of emphasizing school-based curricula, with the task to make a selection regarding aims and contents, schools are now expected to create development plans. This might be taken as an indication of that schools are more clearly than before seen as executive institutions expected to developing themselves as to better reach aims explicated in the national curriculum. However, again, unlike in the Australian setting, the evaluation culture in Finland is based upon a survey approach of students’ knowledge, and not only in relation to literacy, numeracy, but also citizenship education. The Finnish curriculum is influenced differently because of a different evaluation culture and policy environment. Also, unlike the Australian case, the responsibility for evaluation is at the level of the municipality/local council level – a further example of how the Finnish case is less centralized than the Australian case, where such responsibilities are the work of the individual states, but with considerable attention to the influence of NAPLAN, particularly on primary schools.

In a sense, the evaluation approach ‘feeds back’ and influences the way in which teachers and those in schools might engage with the curriculum. The focus on accountability seems to dominate over the potential benefits of the National Assessment Program, and its purported efforts to promote how ‘[s]chools can gain detailed information about how they are performing, and they can identify strengths and weaknesses which may warrant further attention.’ (National Assessment Program, 2016). A non-affirmative approach can only be operationalized if the evaluation system writ large enables such an approach. Pedagogies can only be non-affirmative if the conditions within which teachers teach enable this. In the Australian context, this is problematized by the broader circumstances of national testing within which curriculum is enacted.

This contrasts with Finland where, even as the curriculum refers to assessment, including the ‘purpose of assessment and assessment culture that supports learning’ (p. 49), the conception of assessment promoted in the Finnish curriculum is a much more non-affirmative approach. That is, the Finnish case is much more supportive of an ‘assessment for learning’ approach, with evaluation much more in the hands of the teacher, rather than the state. While teachers in schools are also responsible for evaluation in Australia, the teacher or school is not accountable to an external entity in Finland in the same way that they are in

Australia. Evaluation is not a ‘marker’ of the ‘value’ of the education provided by a particular school – as an example of a market model in education provision – but as an indicator of the learning that has occurred in context. In those settings where the teacher is more ‘forced’ to respond to the evaluation system, the teacher is similarly forced to respond in an ‘affirmative’ way in relation to the student. The result is a strongly instrumentalized approach to teaching practice. Following the logic of such approaches, those modes of accountability encourage less educative experiences. This is what makes the accountability philosophy counter-productive to educational outcomes

The publication of NAPLAN results in the Australian context also reveals how the neoliberal is clearly ascendant. The teacher is recognized for her/his achievements as a teacher, as indicated through these test scores. The strong sense of ethical responsibility within teaching is put at risk, and the professional judgement and trust that should characterize teaching (O’Neill, 2013), diminished; externalized testing ‘takes away’ the sense of such responsibility which becomes more instrumentalized. What matters is ‘good scores’ – an external measure of achievement rather than internal disposition to act. A professional ethics is violated through such processes. Being a teacher is downplayed, and replaced by the activity of constantly responding to these external markers. Again, the ‘recognition’ of the teacher is externalized, and effectively taken away.

However, more external markers of achievement/influences also influence the Finnish context. Even as the aims of education are important, these aims cannot be prescribed definitely in advance, but are instead the product of an informed, educated citizenry engaging with one another about how to construct a better world, a world worth living in (Kemmis et al., 2014), but for a future about which we don’t know. More accountability-oriented approaches assume that we *do* know what needs to be achieved. While nobody disputes strong literacy and numeracy skills are essential, the *kinds* of competencies encouraged are what is important. Critical thinking and creativity are needed but these can become instrumentalized within broader economic logics if homo economicus dominates personhood as political and cultural citizens. Finland has adopted OECD principles of seeking to enhance economic competitiveness through advocating particular ‘entrepreneurial’ principles – hence the focus upon various competences. In many ways, while Finland has resisted adopting ‘horizontal’ policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004), by endeavoring not to go down the path of centralized census-style evaluation systems, there has been a movement ‘together’ – homogenization – in the way in which some of the transversal competences reflect the sorts of economistic logics that similarly characterize the Australian equivalents. In this sense, there is always the risk of policy borrowing rather than policy learning.

Conclusion

Thus, key curriculum documents reflect important tensions and proclivities towards ‘closing down’ educational opportunities for students, even as such texts may simultaneously seek to ‘open up’ more dialogic, non-affirmative and praxis-oriented approaches to education. In this article, we have explored the aims, content and methods advocated within the principal curriculum documents in two different national settings, and how these reflect the relationship between broader national and international influences, and how these have subsequently sought to construct the relationship between teachers and students through these texts. The research reveals that just as more neo-conservative and neoliberal approaches run the risk of limiting the possible life-worlds of those to whom they are directed, such texts contain within them the seeds for more non-affirmative approaches to contest established positions and positioning, and to leave open how schooling might be genuinely ‘educational’ for its students. In efforts to move beyond global economism and neo-conservative nationalism,



curriculum policy is an important part of providing counter-hegemonic discourses and understandings to enable such conditions for learning, even as it may reflect more dominant discourses and understandings.

Important similarities and differences between the Finnish and Australian curricula help shed light upon the nature of the educational processes they seek to construct. This paper has flagged some of these similarities and differences as a vehicle for better understanding whether and how it might be possible to construct non-affirmative, praxis-oriented approaches to curricula development under current policy and political conditions. Through a comparative study, such as this, is it possible to become aware how more local concerns and issues of equity have perhaps been better prioritized in Finland, even as such foci, particularly around equity, are becoming more important in the Australian context. The research has also revealed how more generic competences have exerted influence in both countries, but also how these are varied, with, again, seemingly greater opportunities for more less prescriptive approaches in the Finnish context. The research has also revealed how broader contextual circumstances influence educational traditions – in this case, in relation to curriculum reform.

Such analyses enable each system to become more conscious of its own strengths, limits and proclivities. Once this become apparent, it becomes possible to better understand whether and how curriculum policy as intervention may influence schooling practices more positively and productively, even as such curricula simultaneously reflect more dominant knowledge traditions and conceptions of education within which they are situated.

Such comparative analyses also make it possible to engage in more genuine policy learning. However, arguably, one of the so-called ‘poster-children’ (Finland) of educational reform has not been well ‘represented’ in other contexts, as evident in some of the more problematic approaches and foci that have characterized reforms in some of these contexts.

One might expect policy borrowing – through which a peripheral country such as Finland can become a more influential actant, as an example of how to approach reform differently, and thereby become more influential. However, processes of policy borrowing that have occurred have resulted in convergence around more problematic practices, and it is such convergence that has motivated our study. While there has been a convergence, it appears to have been around different practices from what might be expected, if we are to accept the argument that nation-states should ‘borrow’ from the ‘best’. Nobody learned from Finland, otherwise there should be adoption of the kinds of cultural practices evident in the Finnish context. In a way, perhaps, Finland has ‘learned’ to adopt the sorts of economic, neoliberal policies associated with Anglo countries such as Australia, through advocacy of the various competences rather than vice versa! But this is to overlook the important nuances that actually attend the particular curriculum foci we have outlined here. It is this specificity that is important, and that must be understood in relation to the particular cultural conditions that attend the schooling system in each national context, including the very different evaluation policies in each country. More careful and closer conceptual work, and analysis of specific aspects of schooling, such as key curriculum documentation, enable much greater understanding to inform the sorts of more productive, non-affirmative and praxis-oriented policy borrowing that should attend educational reform.

Notes

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