

Investigating Estonian Teachers' Expectations for the General Education Curriculum

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Abstract

Finding a balance between a centralised and decentralised curricular policy for general education and seeing teachers as autonomous agents of curriculum development is a recurrent issue in many countries. Radical reforms bring about the need to investigate whether and to what extent different parties – and first of all, teachers – are ready to accept and internalise the new policies and roles as curriculum leaders to ensure the sustainability of curriculum development. The purpose of this paper is to describe the development of a questionnaire for investigating Estonian teachers' curricular work and preferences and to introduce the results of its piloting. The main topics covered by the questionnaire are teachers' experience and autonomy in using and developing curricula, their preparation for curriculum development and preferences and expectations for the best curricular solutions. The developed questionnaire can be used for investigating teachers' curricular work and preferences in different national contexts, thus enabling comparative studies across countries with different practices regarding curriculum policy.

Keywords: curriculum, curriculum development, teachers' autonomy, general education, questionnaire

Historically, the official status, form, content, structure and development of curricula have had very different traditions in different countries. In Europe, countries such as the Netherlands and Denmark have been known as examples of the most decentralised curricular policies, meaning that schools and individual teachers have had nearly unrestricted authority to decide on the content and teaching methods (Egelund, 2005; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). In Norway, Sweden and France, the central state level has long exercised great power over the main curricular decisions (Lundahl, 2002; Nilsen, 2010; Schubert, Hansen, Wulf, Kliebard, Lawton, Connell, & Zhang, 1998). Traditionally, strict and prescriptive curricula are used in East Asian countries like China, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (Kennedy, 2010). In the former Soviet Union, including Estonia and Latvia, the curricula were highly centralised for almost 50 years, and teachers have had autonomy in curricular decision-making only since the 1990s (Krull & Trasberg, 2007; Zogla, 2001).

Due to the globalisation and internationalisation of educational studies during the last decades – particularly in the form of international comparative studies on learning outcomes (Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA]; Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS]) – attempts have emerged to homogenise curricular policy in different countries. Sometimes this policy is called “decentralised centralism” (Karlsen, 2000). The attempt to combine the best practices of both centralisation and decentralisation causes on-going changes in curriculum policy (Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). These changes bring about the need to investigate teachers’ readiness to accept and internalise the new policies as they are the main consumers and promoters of new curricula in democratic societies.

The aim of our study was to develop and pilot a questionnaire to investigate general education teachers’ involvement in the development of curricula and teachers’ expectations for different curricular solutions. The article introduces the theoretical background, problems, and possibilities related to elaboration of the questionnaire and the main results of its piloting. The broader aim of this study is to provide a data-gathering instrument which can be used for international comparative studies on the curricular thinking of teachers in countries with different curricular policies and traditions.

Theoretical Background

Research on the Curricular Thinking of Teachers and Their Involvement in Curriculum Development

The need for investigating teachers’ curricular preferences is related to their reported dissatisfaction with the present curricular policy, especially concerning the balance between centralisation and decentralisation of curricular policy in many countries. This particularly concerns countries such as Estonia, Latvia and other former Soviet states, where curriculum development was highly centralised for decades. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, teachers and schools in these countries often faced a new but controversial situation. On the one hand, they enjoyed unprecedented autonomy in curriculum development, while, on the other hand, they were not prepared to take this responsibility as the know-how and traditions of local curriculum development were lost in the Soviet period. The new situation meant an increased workload and uncertainty for teachers due to their lack of preparation for curricular decision making (Olek, 1998; Polyzoï & Cerna, 2001; Zogla, 2001). Interestingly, however, similar results have been reported from countries outside Eastern Europe that have also taken measures to reduce the level of centralisation in their curricular policies – such as Sweden (Lundahl, 2005), China (Wong, 2006, 2008), Hong Kong (Lam & Yeung, 2010) and Australia (Kirk & MacDonald, 2001).

The level of centralisation of curriculum policy as well as the structure and level of specificity of curricular documents are continuously changing everywhere. In Northern countries, many changes in the content, structure, and emphases of curricula have occurred since the early 2000s. In Denmark and Norway, the emphasis has moved from description of learning content and activities towards specification of learning objectives and outcomes. In contrast, Finland has moved towards a more centralised and prescriptive national curriculum from 2004 (Sivesind, 2013). In Latvia, curriculum policy has remained largely centralised and still combined with teachers’ professional autonomy (Catlaks,

2003). Greater emphasis on the integration of subject studies and the acquisition of basic skills – instead of overloading pupils with factual materials – have been important changes characteristic of Latvian curriculum policy in recent years (Eurydice, 2007).

The critical role that teachers play as implementers and developers of curricula has prompted extensive international studies from different perspectives. The teacher's identity and the influence of teachers' attitudes and understandings of the success of educational reforms have been investigated in different countries (Craig, 2006; Drake & Sherin, 2006; März & Kelchtermans, 2013; Shkedi, 2006; Vulliamy, Kimonen, Nevalainen, & Webb, 1997; Wallace & Priestley, 2011). Also, formation of teacher identity related to curricular reforms (Handler, 2010; Sloan, 2006), the teacher's autonomy in making curricular decisions (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014), teachers' ratings of the decentralisation of curriculum policy (Lundahl, 2005; Osei & Brock, 2006; Wong, 2006, 2008), the influence of participation in the development of school curricula on teachers' professional development (Law, Galton, & Wan, 2007; Priestley, Edwards, & Priestley, 2012), teachers' curricular beliefs and conceptual approaches in developing and implementing school curricula (Shawer, 2010; Van Driel, Bulte, & Verloop, 2007, 2008) and teachers' opinions of the possibility of implementing different aspects and components of curricula (Shkedi, 1998; Shriner, Schlee, & Libler, 2010) have been studied extensively.

However, most of the listed studies are qualitative by nature, paying great attention to the specificities of a particular context but offering limited room for rigorous cross-contextual comparison. Large-scale surveys of teachers' curricular beliefs have been rather rare and conducted mainly within the framework of specific subject areas (Ennis & Hooper, 1988; Van Driel et al., 2007, 2008), thus not treating curricula as integral wholes along with general principles and guidelines of the overarching subject syllabi. One notable exception is the teachers' curricular orientation questionnaire developed by Hong Kong researchers, which demonstrates the possibility of developing an instrument for international comparative research in the field of curriculum studies (Cheung & Wong, 2002). This instrument has been used in different countries and contexts. For instance, Jenkins (2009) used it to investigate teachers' curricular orientations in the United States of America.

A substantial prerequisite for developing an applicable survey instrument for cross-national comparison of teachers' curricular beliefs is the determination of certain common elements present in the curricular documents of most or many countries. Given that there is an enormous diversity in the world's countries regarding how general education curricula are determined and structured, the determination of common curricular components or dimensions, is essential for enabling description of a particular national context against the background of an internationally comprehensible system and terminology.

In generalising from the approaches of Tyler (1949), Taba (1962), McNeil (1992) and other recognised approaches, Eash (1991) provides five curriculum components or dimensions typically present in all curricula. These are a) a general understanding of the learner and society; b) aims and objectives of the curriculum; c) form, selection and principles of subject matter content; d) transaction principles and modes – instruction and learning environment methodologies and e) forms and principles of assessment. Eash (1991) emphasises that proportion, level of precision, structure and other aspects of these components differ in various approaches. While elaborating the research methodology and the questionnaire for the current study, we kept Eash's classification and the concepts underlying it in sight.

The Estonian Context

Since regaining the national independence in 1991, the first attempts to introduce national curricula for general education were made in Estonia in 1992 (Unt & Läänemets, 1992) and 1993 (Unt & Läänemets, 1993), but these documents were not granted an official status. The first version of the national curriculum that principally differed from the curricula of the Soviet period and whose main principles and ideology followed in the next two versions of national curricula was introduced in 1996.

All the three versions of Estonian national curricula of general education established in 1996, 2002 and 2011 (Eesti põhi – ja keskhariduse riiklik õppekava [Estonian national curriculum for basic and secondary education], 1996; Põhikooli ja gümnaasiumi riiklik õppekava [National curriculum for basic schools and gymnasia], 2002; Põhikooli riiklik õppekava [National curriculum for basic schools], 2011) consist of the general part and subject syllabi. The general part provides information for all the categories of curricular components identified by Eash (1991).

Subject matter content, learning objectives, detailed goals and objectives of studies, principles for formation of general competences in subject areas, possibilities for integration with other subject areas, principles for treatment of cross-curricular themes, expected learning outcomes, assessment criteria and procedures and requirements for the learning environment are reflected in the subject syllabi.

The main innovations in Estonian curricula since regaining the national independence have been a comprehensive methodology for integrating instruction, a concept of general competences and guidelines for designing school curricula.

It is curious that throughout the period since the first version of the Estonian national curriculum was introduced, its main components, including the guidelines for compiling school curricula, have remained essentially the same and have not changed significantly towards greater school and teacher autonomy. How is it possible that these unchanged principles satisfy the expectations of the educational authorities responsible for curriculum development as well as the expectations of schoolteachers? Are teachers still used to a top-down way of thinking? One of the main goals of the current research is to obtain answers to these questions.

Research Methodology

Development of the Questionnaire

We were interested in how Estonian teachers see their responsibility and autonomy in curricular issues. We attempted to develop a research instrument to discover teachers' attitudes towards existing curricula and procedures for curriculum development at the national and school level, as well as teachers' expectations of ideal curricular solutions. The questionnaire was developed following the generally accepted principles of questionnaire design summarised by Wolf (1997).

As the first step in the development of the questionnaire, a model of factors affecting teachers' use, development and thinking about curricula was created. These factors were conceived in the light of Eash's (1991) five major curriculum concepts or components introduced above. Next, the main potential variables representing or characterising these factors were defined. Thereafter, initial questionnaire items for gathering data on

these variables were compiled and collected into four parts of the questionnaire. The following subsection introduces the structure of the questionnaire as it resulted from the validation procedures.

The Structure and Nature of the Questionnaire

The first part of the “Questionnaire on the General Education Curriculum and Its Development” was designed to collect the necessary data on respondent demographics, such as gender, age, marital status, qualification, teaching experience, workload and initial training. It consisted of eight items using multiple-choice and four using a short answer and completion format. The second part was entitled “Experiences Related to Using Curricula” involved eight multiple-choice and six short answer and completion items and two sets of questions in a Likert-type format. It started with questions about the role that national and school curricula play in respondents’ everyday teaching and their opinions about the quality of those documents. A nine-item Likert-type set of questions in this part asked the respondents to express their opinion on the quality of some curriculum components presented in the general part of the national curricula currently in force, called the “Curriculum Components Rating Scales”. The curriculum components, evaluated on seven-point Likert measurement scales (completely unsatisfactory, unsatisfactory, rather unsatisfactory, neutral, rather satisfactory, satisfactory, completely satisfactory) were:

- statement of educational objectives;
- notion and categorisation of competences expected of students;
- concept and selection of cross-curricular themes;
- concept of learning;
- principles of organising instruction;
- principles for selection of instructional methods and creating a learning environment;
- description of instructional and educational activities by school levels;
- principles of assessment;
- guidelines for compiling school curricula.

In the second part, we also asked the respondents to express their opinion on the extent of their own participation and experiences in the development of the school or national curriculum. Finally, the last item asked the respondents to evaluate the influence of their participation in the development of the curricula both at the national and school level using the five-point Likert measurement scales (very great, great, neutral, rather small, very small).

The third part of the questionnaire was designed for studying the respondents’ preferences for oppositional curricular solutions. We included 14 items, using semantic differential measurement scales called “Optimal Solutions Scales” (Figure 3). The definitions of oppositional curricular solutions were mostly based on statements drawn from contrasting views on the following aspects: a) the relationship between the general part of the national curriculum and the subject syllabi; b) the relationship between national curricula and school curricula and c) the dilemma of teachers’ autonomy in curricular decision-making. Typically, at the one end of the scales, statements were given reflecting current solutions or descriptions of situations in the versions of national curricula, and, at the other end, opposing, alternative solutions were given. For instance, one of these

items asked the respondents to find the proper balance between the statements: *The most helpful school curriculum in my work is the one that (at the one end) rigorously follows the methodological recommendations and prescriptions of the national curriculum and (at the other end) is relatively free of recommendations and prescriptions of the national curriculum.*

The last part of the questionnaire, "Expression of Opinions", consisted of three short answer and completion items that asked the respondents to make unstructured suggestions for improving the curriculum development and its organisation at the local and national levels.

Altogether, 27 questionnaire items from 45 in the questionnaire were provided with spaces for commenting or for giving alternative answers. The content validity of the questionnaire was ensured in two stages. Firstly, the structure of the questionnaire and versions of its items were analysed by the research group members, consisting of five lecturers teaching courses of educational disciplines and researchers, including specialists in curriculum studies. Secondly, different versions of the questionnaire were compiled for improving its quality (in terms of aims, numbers, types and statements of questionnaire items), and, after being approved by the majority of the research group members, the best version was chosen for testing and commenting with a small group of experienced teachers (having teaching experience at least ten years and representing teachers of different school subjects and levels). Suggestions for making the questionnaire more teacher-friendly and relevant were requested of the teachers. Typically, the experts were asked to fill in the questionnaire along with commenting on problems they noticed and suggesting modifications for the draft. After the suggested modifications were taken into consideration, the pilot version of the questionnaire was considered ready for piloting with a small sample of teachers not involved in the validation of the draft.

Piloting of the Questionnaire

The piloting of the questionnaire was carried out in March of 2012. A convenience sample was composed of teachers from three local schools in Tartu, the principals of which our research assistant had personal contact. This provided the easiest access to a big number of teachers with relatively modest financial means. Considering the smallness of Estonia as a country, high level of urbanization and availability of the same television channels and the Internet in the most remote areas, we did not expect relevant regional differences in teachers' curricular thinking and, therefore, did not see a need for piloting this questionnaire in different areas of the country.

The teachers in the piloting sample were chosen so that the major subject groups – teachers of social sciences and humanities, natural sciences and mathematics and class teachers – were represented in equal proportions. Teacher participation was voluntary. Of 150 questionnaires distributed to teachers, 103 completed questionnaires were returned. 35 questionnaires were returned by teachers of social sciences and humanities, equally 34 by teachers of sciences and mathematics and class teachers. 86% of the respondents were women. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 66 years, with an average of 45. The teaching experience of the respondents ranged from zero to 44 years, with an average of 21 years. The weekly work load of the respondents remained between 23 to 26 hours for 54% of the respondents. The average work load of the respondents was 22.6 hours.

The average time spent for filling in the questionnaire was 38 minutes with a maximum of 120.

Data Analysis

Depending on the nature of data, procedures of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis were used. The quantified data were analysed using procedures of descriptive and inferential statistics. The internal reliability of the scales was determined and item analysis was executed for ensuring the acceptable coherence of these scales. Also, the factor analysis of the Optimal Solution scales was conducted. The open answers and comments were analysed mostly using procedures of qualitative content analysis.

Results

Teachers as Users of Curricula

When asked to estimate to what extent the national curriculum and school curriculum had been helpful as guidelines for teaching, the majority of the respondents (56 and 58%, respectively) found that they had been helpful in some way, and close to a third (32 and 39%) – that they had been most helpful. 60% of the teachers found the importance of national and school curricula as guidelines for teaching to be about the same. However, 25% of them answered that they relied only on school curricula as guidelines, in contrast to 11% of teachers who relied solely on the national curriculum. When asked to characterise to what extent national or school curricula were empowering or limiting their decision-making freedom, the majority (70 and 74% respectively) of the respondents replied that the curricula did not empower or limit their decision-making freedom. The percentage of those who found these documents to restrict or increase their freedom remained between 11 and 13%.

Teachers gave their ratings on the curriculum components covered by general parts of the 2002 or 2011 national curricula on the Curriculum Components Rating Scales. By definition, the items in the scale were designed to give ratings to curricula that teachers were actually using, as due to the transfer period, the 2002 and 2011 curricula were simultaneously in use. However, against our expectations that teachers would choose to characterise one of these two curricula, the majority of teachers actually gave ratings to both versions. The solutions of the 2011 curriculum received higher ratings on seven items out of nine.

Teacher Experience in Curriculum Development

Answers to the items in this section of the questionnaire gave some ideas as to how teachers assess their preparation for curriculum work and how they perceive their real participation and influence on this work. 43% of the respondents answered that they had received some preparation for curriculum development, and 41% – that they had had sufficient preparation for participation in curriculum development. About 80% of the respondents claimed to be involved in the development of the national or school curricula.

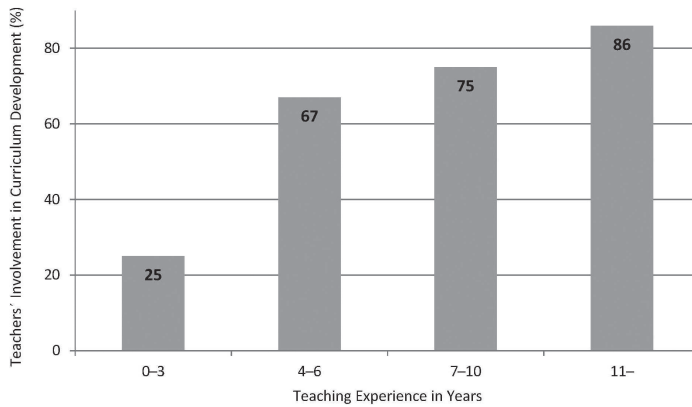


Figure 1. Teachers' involvement in curriculum development as percentages depending on their teaching experience

However, data analysis revealed that only 25% of the beginning teachers admitted participation in curriculum development activities (Figure 1). When asked to estimate their potential impact on the development of the curricula, about 15% of the teachers found that they had a very significant or significant impact on the development of general parts of national curricula, 60% – found that their impact to be rather insignificant or insignificant (Figure 2). However, about 65% of the respondents claimed that they had a significant impact on the development of school curricula.

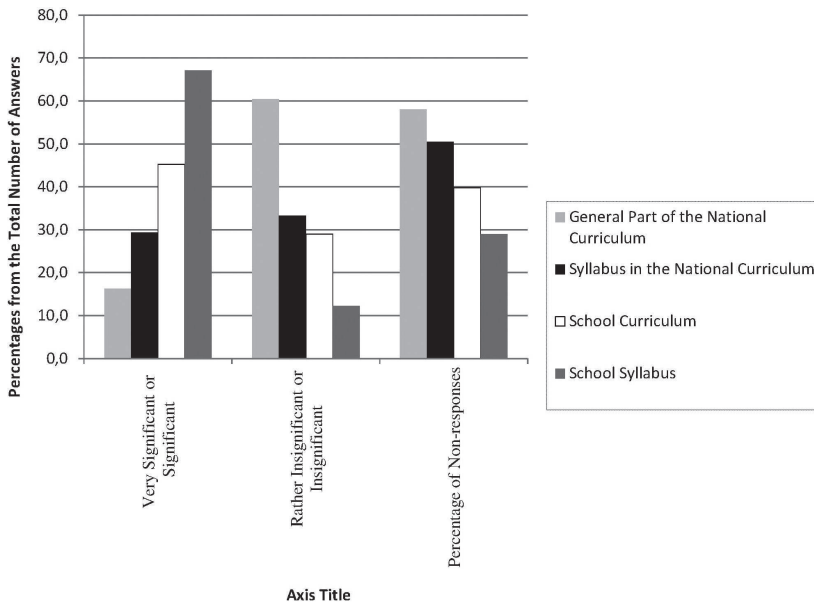


Figure 2. The distribution of teachers' estimations of their real impact on the development of the curricula as percentages (from the total number of answers)

Teachers' Perceptions of Optimal Curricular Solutions

The third part of the questionnaire studied teachers' perceptions of optimal curricular solutions on *Optimal Solution Scales*. 14 items were constructed as oppositional alternatives to the main curriculum components. To obtain a better picture of the respondents' preferences, their replies were dichotomised in data processing. This procedure revealed that there were clear preferences for solutions in answers to 11 items (Figure 3) (see figure 3 on the next page). As for the three items are concerned, (items 1, 5 and 13), the respondents' preferences were almost equally distributed between opposing solutions, and there was no statistical difference between the corresponding pairs of percentages (at a significance level $p < 0.05$).

Findings Based on Qualitative Content Analysis of Open-ended Answers to the Questionnaire Items

The biggest problems in using curricula listed by the respondents were the lack of study aids, shortage of time and overloaded the subject syllabi.

There was a lot of variety in teachers' replies to the item asking them to define in their own words what they meant by curriculum. One group of teachers defined it as a plan or framework – all pointing to its primary nature *as a guideline*. Another group of answers pointed to its *normative character* – regulations, prescriptions and a set of requirements. The third group of teachers conceived it as *an instructional aid that guides and helps* teachers. The fourth group defined curriculum as *a document reflecting instructional goals and objectives to be achieved*. The fifth group of teachers defined it as *a collection of themes and list of contents*.

The diversity in the teachers' definitions of curriculum shows that their understanding and knowledge in the curricular field varies, and common ground could be useful in finding better solutions.

The most negative features of curricula for the respondents were overloaded syllabi, over-expanded requirements for integrating instruction and teaching using cross-curricular themes and unrealistic requirements for the learning environment. These statements show that much work needs to be done to make the curriculum usable for teachers. It is not enough to list cross-curricular themes and general competences, but there is also a need to show how these themes and competences should be treated in subject syllabi.

The most positive features of curricula were the principles of integration and assessment, creativity, orientation to thinking and sufficient space left for decision-making at the school level. These statements are promising – teachers value the new orientation of teaching, learning and autonomy towards decision-making.

The most positive experiences for teachers as curriculum designers were teamwork and cooperation, being thoroughly informed about the curricular solutions, and the feeling of personal usefulness. On the negative side, the teachers pointed out difficulties in reaching agreements and a lot of unpaid work and invested time. The fact that the teachers valued the feeling of personal usefulness and teamwork with colleagues is rather promising. Could it be that they have had too few opportunities to participate in curriculum development and are not used to taking it as an integral part of their work, but rather see it as unpaid extra work?

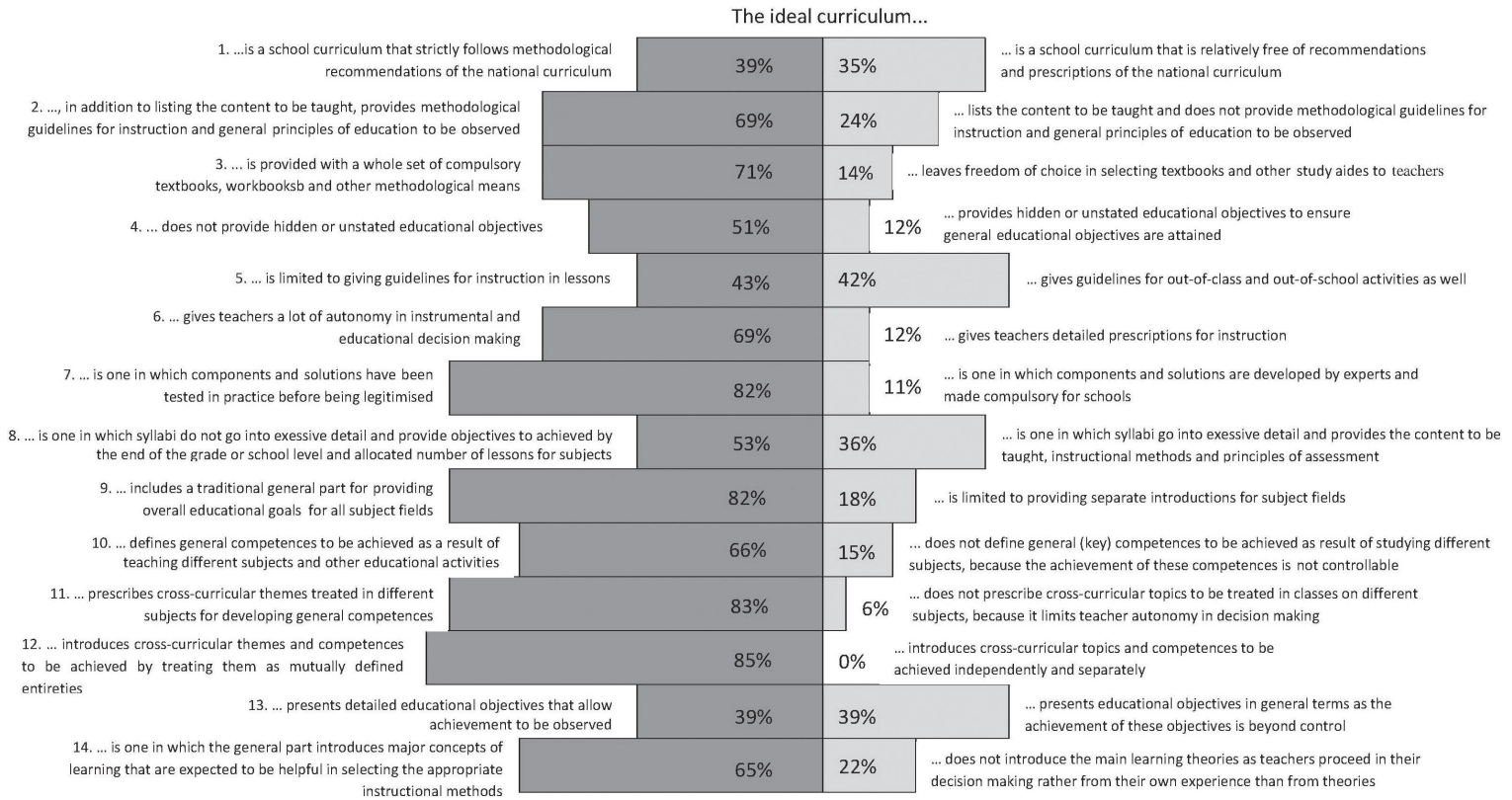


Figure 3. Dichotomised distribution of teachers' preferences for oppositional curricular solutions as percentages

To create a curriculum that is most effective for the everyday work of teachers, they proposed involving practitioners, ensuring financial and other resources, trying out new curricula in pilot schools and providing teachers with more methodologies and examples. These statements show that teachers are not yet ready to create their own instructional materials and need more materials, examples and methodologies to choose those that are the most appropriate and suitable to their needs.

Analysis of the Results of the Piloting

Practically all sections of the research instrument needed some modification. Especially, this concerns the used scales for rating curriculum components and expressing preferences of curriculum solutions. The both of them were submitted to the item analysis for increasing their internal reliability. In the questionnaire, the Curriculum Components Rating Scales played a central role in revealing teachers' thoughts about the 2002 and 2011 national curricula. As its internal reliability revealed by the item analysis was good (Cronbach alfa 0.90), we left this component of the questionnaire unchanged. Still, some modifications were made in the format and location of the questionnaire items.

The item analysis of optimal solutions scales showed that the reliability of this component of the questionnaire was not sufficient. Of course, more diversity in the teachers' preferences for ideal curriculum solutions and, also, in their understanding of proposed solutions could be expected. Gradual elimination of weakly correlated items until achieving the reliability index of Cronbach alpha 0.70, considered to be satisfactory (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2010), forced removal of half of the initial measurement scales.

The seven measurement scales, which harmonised with each other, included items 1, 4, 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14 (Figure 3). All of these items ask the respondents to describe their preferences between relatively prescriptive and restrictive curricular guidelines and those that allow teachers to make their own decisions. This block of items could be labelled "Expectations for Curricular Autonomy One".

An analysis of the seven items initially eliminated from the set of 14 measurement scales allowed the selection of a combination of four items for which the reliability index reached the value of 0.72. This group of scales involved items 2, 5, 6 and 8 (Figure 3). This group of items describes, like the previous one, teachers' preferences regarding curricular solutions ranging from very restrictive to those giving teachers a lot of autonomy. In comparison with the first group of items described above, this one seems to test teachers' curricular preferences in more general terms without going into specifics. However, the distinction is rather vague, and this group was therefore labelled "Expectations for Curricular Autonomy Two".

Discussion and Conclusions

On the basis of the pilot study results, modifications were made in almost all parts of the questionnaire. Most changes were made in the items presented on the optimal solutions scales. Satisfactory reliability was achieved by creating two subscales, eliminating two items and rewording the remaining items.

The analysis of findings also supplied valuable information for compiling a representative sample of teachers. Firstly, it revealed that by subject field, different teachers'

groups (social sciences and humanities, sciences and mathematics and class teachers) had somewhat different work experience and consequently different understandings of curricular guidelines. Secondly, the study pointed out that teachers' involvement in the development of the curriculum depended on their teaching experience. The conclusion for a further study is that, in order to be representative, the sample of teachers should be stratified in terms of teachers' subject groups and experience groups.

The results of this study provided many indications of Estonian teachers' satisfaction with the existing curricula, their involvement in developing curricula and their expectations seen from the perspective of teachers' perceived autonomy as curriculum users and developers. Many of these findings represented controversial information about the relationship between national and school curricula seen by teachers as users of these curricula. Most of the respondents were satisfied with the 2011 national curriculum in general and revealed that the national and school curricula have been helpful as guidelines for teaching.

The analysis of teachers' expectations of ideal curricular solutions was more informative for understanding teachers' readiness to act as autonomous developers of curricula. Their readiness and willingness for autonomous instructional decision-making, as opposed to preferring detailed guidelines and mandated study aids for teaching, was reflected by three items of the optimal solutions scales. In these items, the respondents expressed support in almost equal percentages for greater autonomy in teachers' decision-making and for having prescriptive and detailed guidelines in instruction. The teachers' perception that the school curriculum increased their freedom of instructional decision-making correlated positively with mutually exclusive preferences for greater autonomy and control. From the 11 items that were retained in the modified scale after the item analysis, two items (Figure 3) clearly expressed teachers' preferences for prescriptive curricular guidelines. In contrast, item 6 expressed teachers' preference for a curriculum that assumed teachers had greater autonomy in educational decision-making.

The answers to the remaining eight items (3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 14) reflected teachers' preferences for comprehensiveness and the integrity of curricular guidelines and materials.

From the last eight listed, items 3, 4, 7, 12 and 14 mostly reflect teachers' wish to change the existing curricular solutions. Instead, items 9, 10 and 11 express fairly teachers' support for curricular solutions that they have experienced since the 1996 national curriculum was introduced.

Many findings from teachers' answers to the expectation scale were confirmed and supplemented by teachers' open-ended answers to the questionnaire items. Thus, the respondents recalled that more attention was paid to proposals made by teachers and that new curricula, before being made mandatory, were tested. The variety in how teachers define curriculum shows the diversity in teachers' preparation, knowledge and expectations, which should be taken into account by curriculum developers and teachers' educators in finding common ground and "speaking" one language. It is not enough to state cross-curricular themes and competences to be achieved in the general part of the curriculum. Teachers need more guidance, examples and materials for integrating these into teaching their subject matter content.

The analysis and generalisation of the study results leads to the conclusion that the respondents' preferences for greater autonomy in curricular decision-making and for having detailed guidelines and instructions to follow were almost equally distributed.

The majority of the respondents expressed a preference for the comprehensiveness and integrity of curricular guidelines, but, in reality, they mostly supported curricular improvements in the framework of curricular solutions that are characteristic of the national curricula that they have themselves experienced in their work. One possible explanation is that Estonian teacher education programmes do not provide beginning teachers with a basic knowledge of alternative approaches to instructional design and to providing curricular guidelines. Consequently, the majority of teachers, if they even see themselves as involved in the development of the curriculum at the national and school level, fail to propose solutions beyond those they have experienced and used themselves. The same applies to seeing issues of curricular autonomy and control by educational authorities at the national or school level. Therefore, the documented teachers' expectations of national curricula mostly manifested a vague satisfaction with the limited autonomy in curricular decision-making, with few cases of dissatisfaction, but failed to propose constructive solutions to shortcomings.

The respondents would disagree with this conclusion as 43% of them claimed to have some preparation for curriculum development and 41% even had sufficient preparation for participation in these activities. But a large variation in defining what is meant by the term "curriculum", as revealed by the qualitative content analysis of open-ended answers, does not support these claims. One explanation for this controversy could be that Estonian teachers are not quite aware of what independent curriculum development means. Moreover, they are not ready to take greater responsibility for instructional decision-making. Could it be that the majority of teachers in the former Soviet republics are still used to following prescriptive curricula and curriculum developers are used to seeing teachers rather as *faithful implementers of an externally developed curriculum* and not as autonomous consumers and decision-makers (Silberstein & Ben-Peretz, 1987) or *curriculum leaders* (Handler, 2010)? This might also explain why the nature of guidelines for compiling the school curricula in the national framework curricula has not progressed towards greater school and teacher autonomy. Although educational researchers and policy makers have adapted internationally acknowledged images of teachers as *reflective, self-determining, life-long learning practitioners with high professional autonomy*, the impact of national and historical contexts should be taken into account (Wermke & Höstfält, 2014). Consequently, in countries like Estonia and Latvia, more attention should be paid to the preparation of teachers for curricular policy making and instructional design in pre-service, but mostly in in-service teacher training. Teachers' professional credibility in the eyes of curriculum developers should grow. Teachers should have more opportunities to participate in the development of curricula at the national and school levels in order to feel personal responsibility and ownership in these activities and to ensure the sustainability of curriculum development. It is promising that, in their open answers, teachers stated that participation in the development of the curriculum was mostly a positive experience due to cooperation and team work with colleagues. Perhaps it shows a readiness to participate and take more responsibility to become a curricular leader and informed professional. Lots of urgent questions still need to be answered: *How do educational authorities at national level see teachers as curriculum developers and how is this reflected in the general parts and syllabi of national curricula? How are teacher training programmes treating curriculum theory and practice and the role of the teacher in it? What are school administrators' views on teachers' autonomy and their role in the development of curricula?* Answering these questions

helps to understand the local contexts for developing curricula in order to make better decisions and ensure sustainable curricular development.

These conclusions are still preliminary, and more solid ones can be made after a more comprehensive study is conducted. The created questionnaire can hopefully be used as a prototype for developing a suitable data collection instrument allowing international comparative studies of teachers' expectations for curricular policy and specific solutions.

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