



*CURRICULUM MAKING IN THE BGE – EMERGING FINDINGS*

MARK PRIESTLEY AND MICHELLE RITCHIE

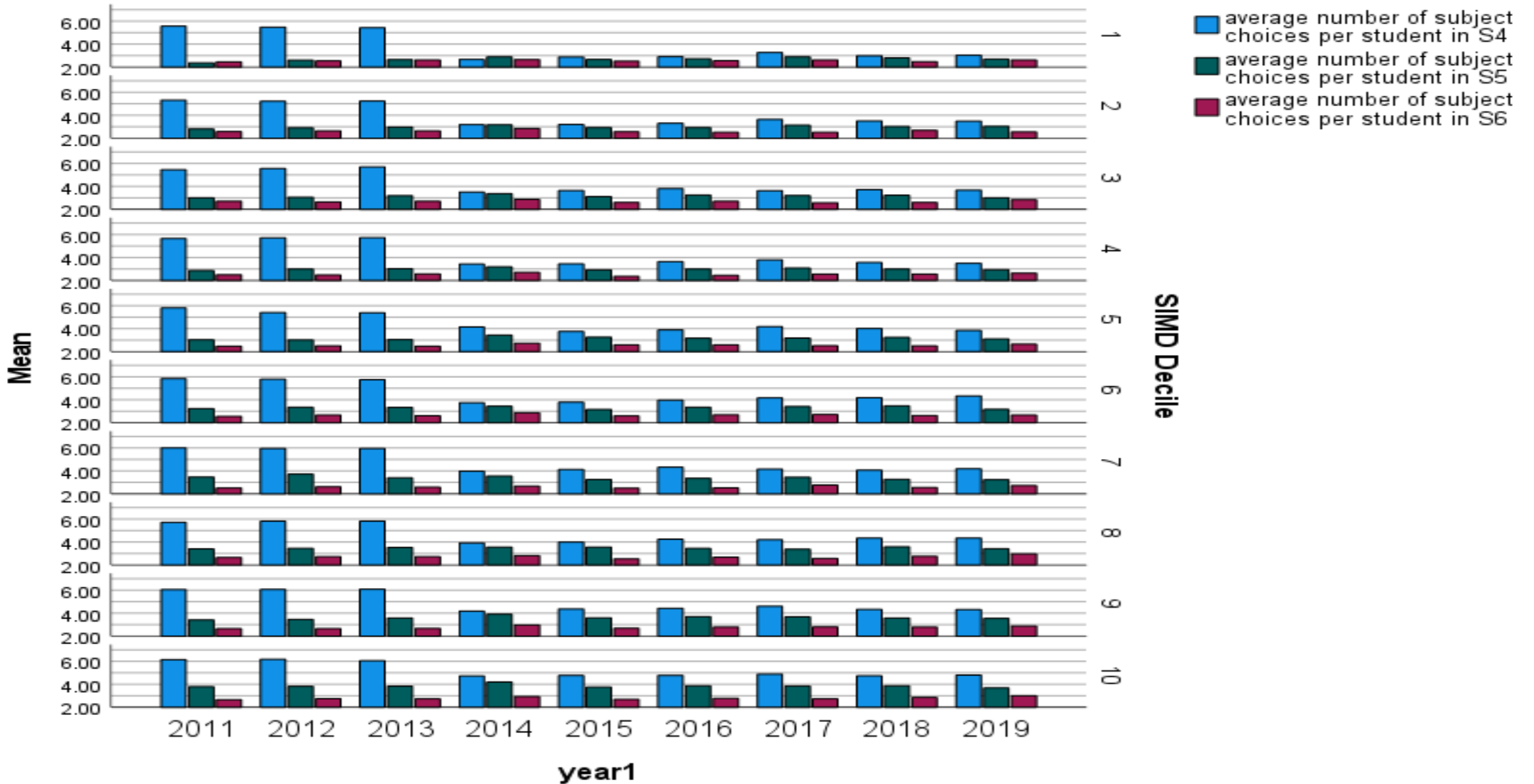
## BACKGROUND

Aim: to explore how the BGE is implemented and experienced at school-level and to investigate whether the senior phase has a backwash effect on the BGE at secondary school level.

### The OECD Review

- *“In practice, the alignment between the learning aims and objectives and the four capacities in the Senior Phase is limited by the type of assessments and subsequent learning practices imposed by restrictive coursework to prepare for national qualifications. While these qualifications can be considered as statements about the specific goals of learning, their emphasis seems to deviate from CfE’s broader curriculum philosophy and aims. This narrow focus also appears to have backwash effects on teaching practices and learning experiences in the last years of BGE”*(OECD, 2020, p.11).

# SUBJECT CHOICES BY SIMD DECILE



# Curriculum Making in Europe

Policy and Practice  
Within and Across  
Diverse Contexts



Edited by

Mark Priestley  
Daniel Alvunger  
Stavroula Philippou  
Tiina Soini

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

*NEW  
CURRICULUM  
THINKING*

Current thinking

- Curriculum as content – too limited
- Curriculum as everything – too vague

Better - the multi-layered social practices, including content selection, infrastructure, pedagogy and assessment, through which education is structured, enacted and evaluated

At least three dimensions to this.

- The notion of curriculum as social practice; something 'made' by practitioners and other actors working with each other.
- The idea that curriculum is made across multiple 'sites of activity' within education systems
- The multitude of practices that comprise curriculum



Site of activity	Examples of activity	Examples of actors
Supra	Transnational curricular discourse generation, policy borrowing and lending; policy learning	OECD; World Bank; UNESCO; EU
Macro	Development of curriculum policy frameworks; legislation to establish agencies and infrastructure	National governments; curriculum agencies; teachers; students
Meso	Production of guidance; leadership of and support for curriculum making; production of resources	National governments; curriculum agencies; district authorities; textbook publishers; curriculum brokers; teachers; students
<b>Micro</b>	School level curriculum making: programme design; lesson-planning	Principals; senior leaders; middle leaders; teachers; students
Nano	Curriculum making in classrooms and other learning spaces: pedagogic interactions; curriculum events	Teachers; students

# A CURRICULUM MAKING SYSTEM

- Curriculum making is social practice that happens in different forms and for different reasons in different sites
- Actors can operate across multiple sites (e.g. teachers as policy writers in Wales) – with benefits

## *THE RESEARCH*

A survey of secondary school senior leaders (N=115)

National focus groups:

- Teachers across a range of subjects
- Headteachers
- Local authority (leaders and QIOs)

Case studies (ongoing)

- 3 schools with differing demographic characteristics

## *THE SURVEY DATA*

---

In S1 and S2 a student typically studies 8 or more subjects per week and in S3 students typically study 7 or more subjects per week.

---

Over 30% of schools offered students opportunities to study a maximum of 16+ subjects in a typical week in S1 and S2.

---

On average, the maximum number of subjects for S1 and S2 was 15 while the average for S3 was 12. There was no variation in averages between reported 2+2+2 or 3+3 curriculum models.

---

2% of schools reported students had no choice of subjects in the BGE phase. In 14% of schools, students first had a choice over subjects in S1, in 51% of schools, students first had a choice in S2 and in 34% of schools, students first had a choice of subjects in S3.



*THE SURVEY  
DATA*

---

36% of schools offered no subjects on a rotational basis and 17% of schools offered no subjects on a fully integrated basis.

---

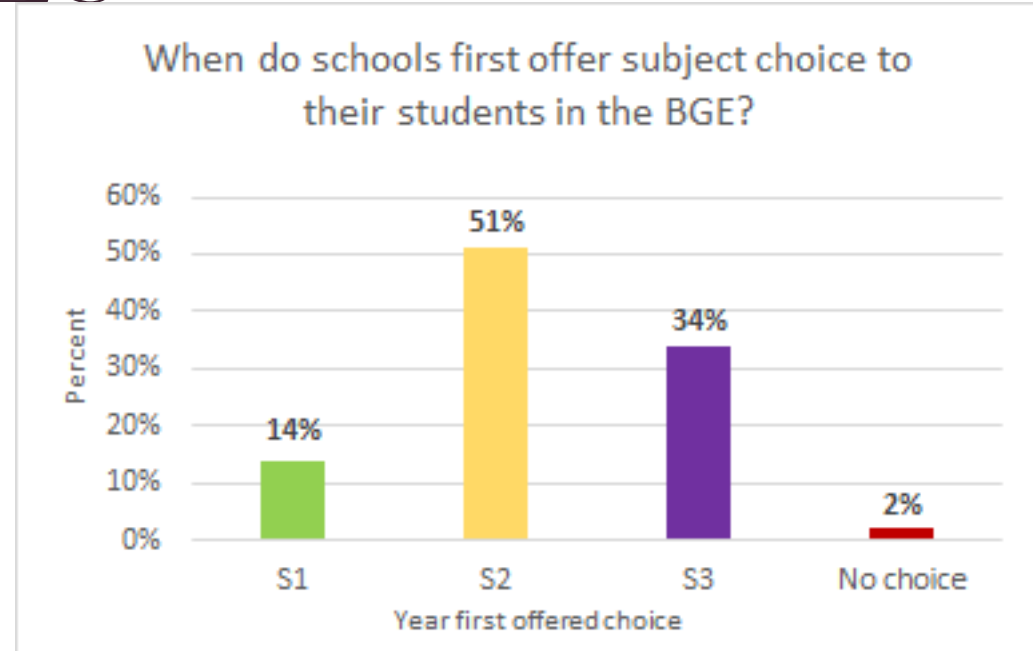
Social subjects were the most frequently offered on a rotational basis (39% of schools) and sciences were as a rule were offered on a fully integrated basis (70% of schools).

---

27% of schools reported having planned Interdisciplinary Learning (IDL) days for specific year groups, 20% had a weekly timetabled slot for IDL, and 67% reported having a strategic approach to IDL across curricular areas and year groups (e.g. Faculties working together across curriculum areas and/or year groups to design).

# SURVEY FINDINGS ON BGE SUBJECT CHOICES

Maximum number of subjects	S1	S2	S3
7 subjects	0%	0%	1%
8 subjects	1%	1%	5%
9 subjects	0%	0%	6%
10 subjects	4%	4%	13%
11 subjects	4%	4%	24%
12 subjects	6%	9%	28%
13 subjects	12%	6%	7%
14 subjects	22%	19%	7%
15 subjects	18%	23%	4%
16 subjects	12%	12%	1%
17 subjects	13%	11%	2%
18 subjects	4%	7%	0%
19 subjects	1%	2%	0%
20 subjects	1%	2%	0%
21 subjects	0%	1%	0%
22 subjects	1%	0%	0%
40 subjects	1%	1%	1%



	Average number of subjects studied by students
S1	15
S2	15
S3	12

*NATIONAL LEVEL  
POLICY  
INFLUENCE ON  
THE BGE*

---

*Schools were asked to what extent each individual factor influenced and informed the design and provision of their school's BGE. Respondents used a five-point rating scale from 1 'Not at all influential' to 5 'Extremely influential'.*

---

From the reported data, CfE policies are at least moderately influential in most schools.

---

However, of the CfE policies, the Four Capacities are the least influential.

---

Notably, the Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) policy is a very strong influence of school curriculum.

---

The policy which is least influential is the National Gaelic Language Plan with over 8 in 10 schools (83%) reporting this policy as 'not at all influential' in designing and providing their school's BGE.

---

Availability and ability of staff is a 'very' or 'extremely' influential factor on BGE provision (78%).

---

*QUALITATIVE  
DATA:  
KEY THEMES  
RELATING TO  
THE BGE*

- Teachers welcome the flexibility to fit the curriculum to local contexts and to explore learner interests and topical events. However, all groups expressed concern that localised flexibility/regional variation will impact on student equity and lead to a postcode lottery in provision at national level.
- Assessment/Attainment driving the curriculum in the senior phase with a washback effect on the BGE, particularly on S3 provision with preparation beginning for national qualifications in the senior phase.
- Curriculum narrowing – reduced offering in expressive arts and modern languages, and in subjects where there are staff shortages.
- Conceptualisation/terminology
  - Many teachers and parents report that CfE terminology is ambiguous and confusing (described as jargon)
  - Parents find CfE levels particularly challenging to understand-they don't know where their child is 'at' in terms of progression.

*QUALITATIVE  
DATA:  
KEY THEMES  
RELATING TO  
THE BGE*

- Challenging environment for curriculum making
  - Staff shortages particularly acute in Maths, Technology and Home Economics.
  - A lack of cover has diminished non-contact time, and this has been exacerbated during the pandemic with staff forgoing non-contact time to provide cover in their department.
  - Poor teaching resources (e.g. antiquated resources in physics), lack of classroom accommodation to increase provision and to try new innovative approaches (e.g. lack of break out areas for cross-curricular working).
- Tension between subject specialism and integrated subjects/IDL-teachers prefer discrete subjects. Development of IDL has been limited. Many schools employ rich tasks (e.g. IDL days or themed week).
- Size and geographic location of school impacts on subject provision (e.g. rural areas unable to offer some subjects)

# *HEADTEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS*

- BGE – short experience for most secondary students.
- Incoherent curriculum – BGE and Senior Phase feel like separate schools and different curriculum.
- Belief that IDL in the BGE has not been successfully enacted– on paper it sounds good, but difficult to develop in practice due to timetabling/staff skillsets. Often looks quite traditional: provision has remained unchanged from the 5-14 system in terms of content. HTs are frank about the fact that BGE development has been put on the back burner to focus on the senior phase. Would like to draw upon the community more and be able to timetable longer lessons.
- Narrow focus on 'successful learner' in inspections is stifling creativity in the BGE and senior phase. Inspection and attainment agenda constrains curriculum innovation.
- Resourcing issues – unable to satisfy the needs of all young people due resources being stretched.
- Need to question the purpose of what is being taught and why in the BGE and to examine the role of knowledge.



# *TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS*

- Teachers would like more time and freedom to be experimental and to innovate in the BGE. Lack of time is a recurring theme. Teachers are clearly keen to innovate but they are constrained by staffing pressures and workload. Time spent on bureaucracy is a source of frustration for teaching staff. They would rather invest time in teaching and learning to provide quality lessons for students.
- Teachers feel under pressure to recruit young people in the BGE for study at national qualification level to secure the future of their subject (viz. Technology subjects) and to secure their jobs by averting the risk of being declared surplus. This feeds the culture of performativity. Further, it demonstrates that decisions re. subject provision are based on finance rather than educational decision making.
- Tension between specialist subject knowledge and the goals and principles of CfE. Teachers dislike teaching subjects out with their specialist area because of a lack of in-depth knowledge (e.g. Geography teaching Modern Studies as part of integrated Social Subjects). Some Principal teachers and Headteachers commented that they decided to develop the BGE as discrete subjects because of staff preference and to provide a better experience for their learners.

# *STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS*

- Subject choices at too young an age
- Lack of flexibility
  - Course choice columns as a constraint on subject choice whereby young people were forced to pick the 'best of a bad bunch' and study a subject that they didn't want to study.
  - One young person described their curricular experience as a linear route with no room to manoeuvre and 'tunnel vision'.
  - The curriculum narrowed too early for young people who wanted to study science at Higher level e.g. they had to choose physics from S2.
- A significant jump in the level of challenge between the BGE and the senior phase. In some cases, this impacted on mental health
- Many enjoyed the more active learning in the BGE and felt that it contrasted greatly with the didactic approaches in the senior phase.

# *PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS*

- Parents expressed disappointment that children need to narrow subjects as they progress to S3. They feared that their children were not able to study subjects for breadth and enjoyment/respite from academic study in the senior phase. Concern was expressed re. a lack of access to expressive arts such as drama and music.
- 'No real choice'-timetabling/column clashes and school priorities (e.g. STEM) are dictating the courses that young people can study.
- The language of CfE described as jargon. Parents reported that CfE is difficult to understand, particularly CfE levels. Parents found it difficult to understand how learner progression is measured

## *IN SUMMARY*

- Articulation between the BGE and Senior Phase is challenging.
- Assessment/attainment is driving the curriculum in the senior phase with a washback effect on the BGE whereby learners are prepared for national qualifications in the BGE. National qualifications have arguably come to define CfE in secondary schools with the BGE becoming assessment driven in S3.
- 'Successful learner' is the primary capacity used to gauge success rather than wider achievement.
- Teachers do not have enough time to develop the BGE and acknowledge that provision needs to be improved. Remnants of 5-14 are visible.
- Many young people feel that the BGE does not adequately prepare them for the demands of course work in the senior phase.
- Young people report that they do not enjoy learning in the senior phase as much as the BGE because of 'teaching to the test' and the focus on 'memorisation' and exam syllabi/technique. Didactic pedagogy in the senior phase contrasts with the active pedagogy of the BGE.
- CfE levels are challenging for parents to understand.