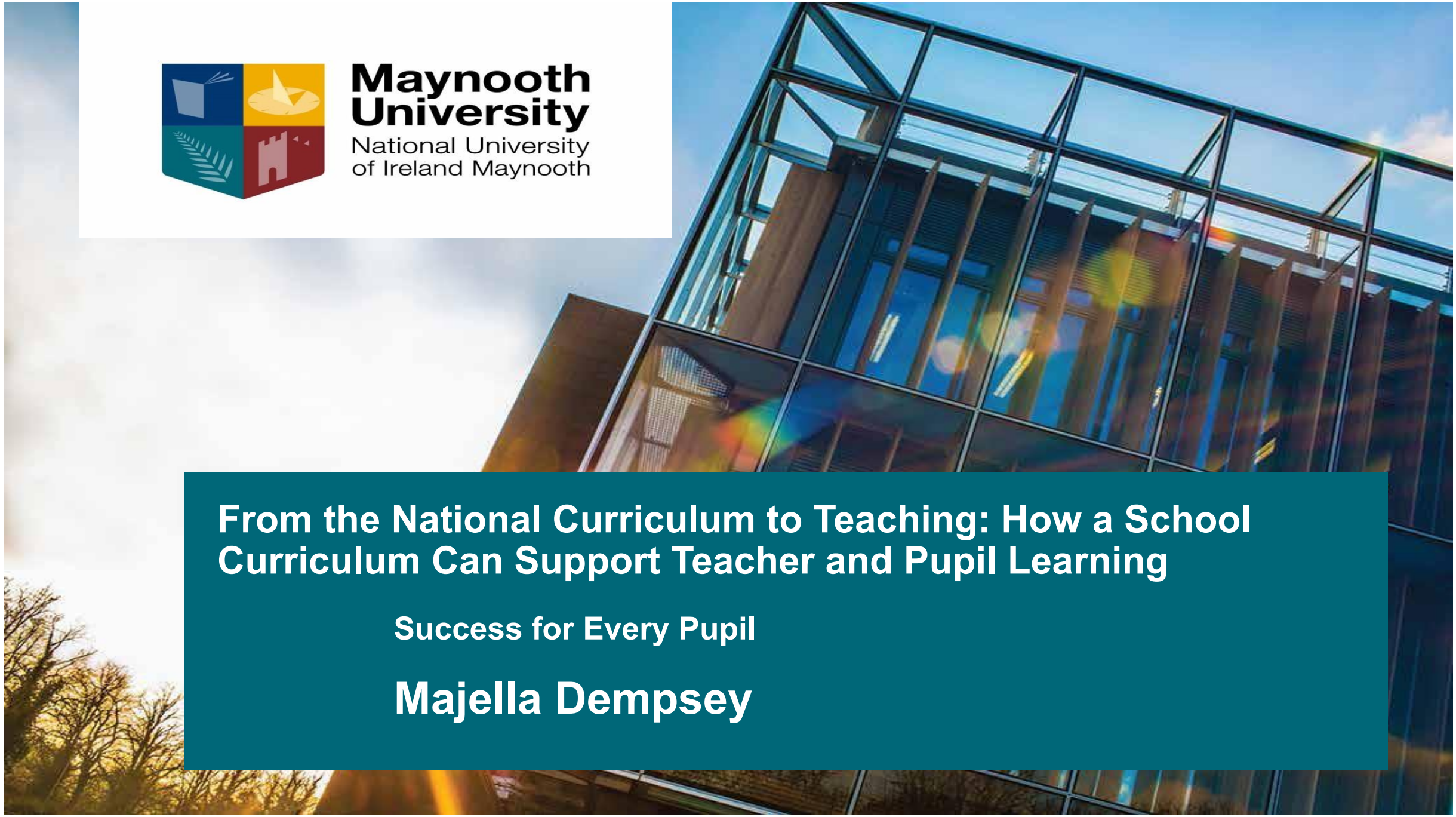


From the National Curriculum to Teaching: How a School Curriculum Can Support Teacher and Pupil Learning

Success for Every Pupil

Majella Dempsey

Agenda

Talk will focus on how to translate the national curriculum into school and classroom practice in ways that genuinely help teachers plan coherent teaching.

It will explore how a school curriculum can support teachers’ understanding of shared learning goals, the ongoing assessment of pupils’ progress, and teacher collaboration.

It will open up the question of how the development of a school curriculum can support professional learning within the school and teaching that increases every pupil’s chances of success, regardless of their starting points.

Ireland's PISA 2025 Results

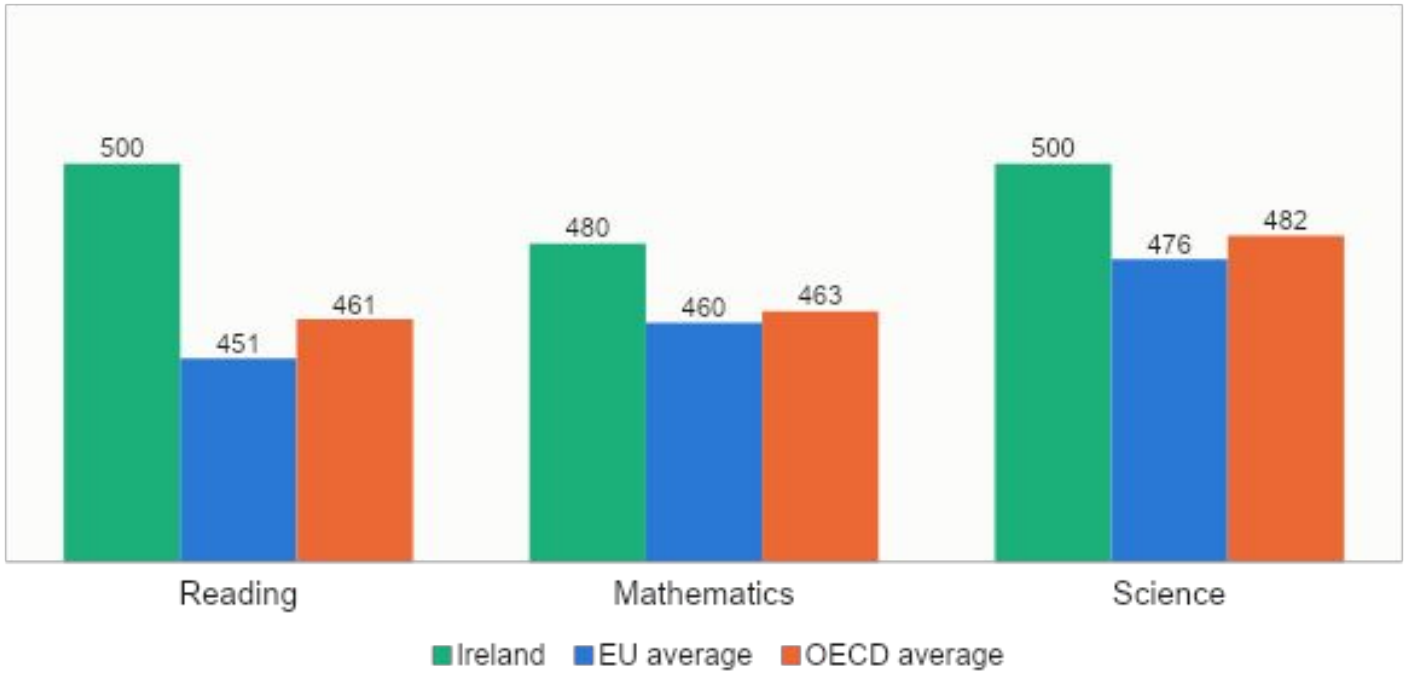
How Irish 15-year-olds performed in reading, mathematics and science, compared with the EU and OECD averages

1st — **Reading** in the EU (27 countries)

3rd — **Science** in the EU (27 countries)

4th — **Mathematics** in the EU (27 countries)

PISA score, by subject



Scores have fallen since 2015

Reading	521 → 516 → **500**
Mathematics	504 → 492 → **480**
Science	503 → 504 → **500**

Ireland's decline mirrors an international trend — but was smaller than the average OECD/EU drop over the same period, and Ireland remains well above both averages in every domain.

Source: OECD, PISA 2025 (released 8 Sept 2026); Dept. of Education press release. 6,356 Irish students, 172 schools. 2022 comparisons affected by COVID-19 testing disruption.

Czechia's PISA 2025 Results

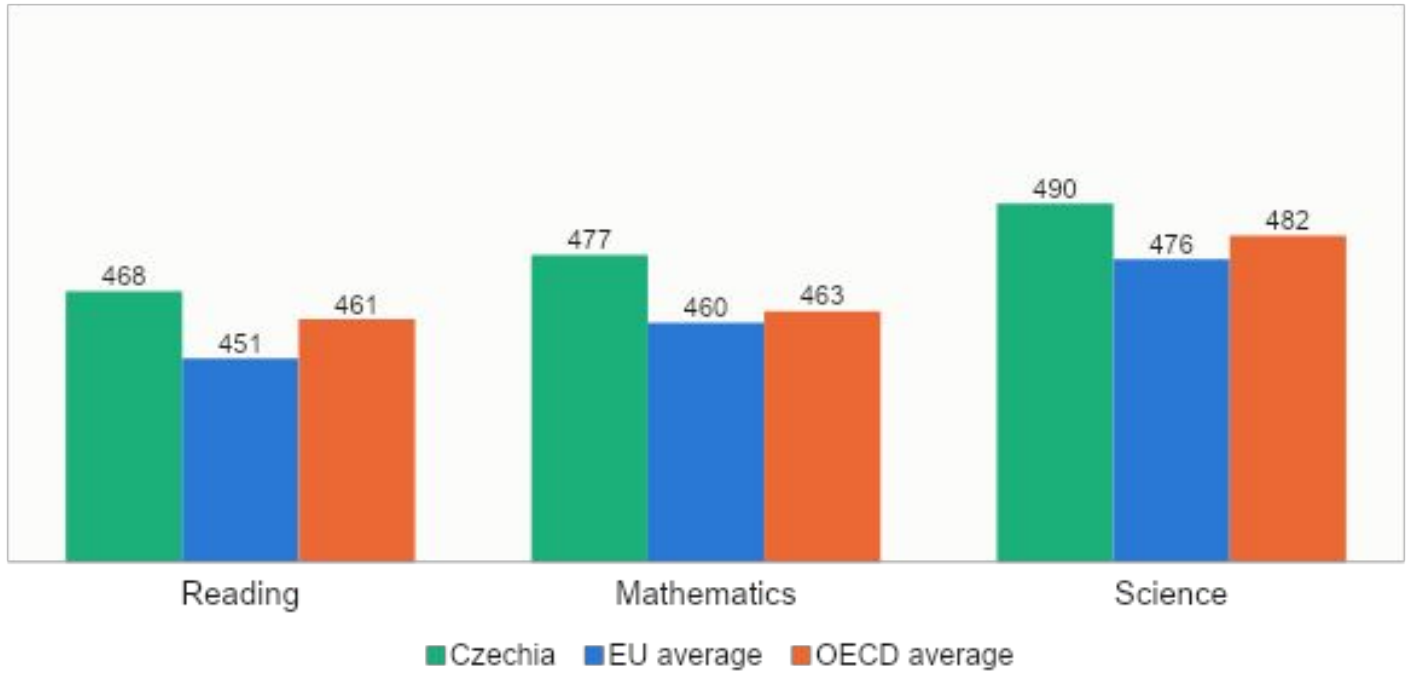
How Czech 15-year-olds performed in reading, mathematics and science, compared with the EU and OECD averages

+7
Reading
points above the OECD average

+8
Science
points above the OECD average

+14
Mathematics
points above the OECD average

PISA score, by subject



Scores have fallen since 2015

Reading	487 → 489 → **468**
Mathematics	492 → 487 → **477**
Science	493 → 498 → **490**

Czechia remains above the OECD and EU averages in every domain, but reading fell by 20 points since 2022 (OECD average: −14) and mathematics by 10 (OECD: −9). The drop in science was not statistically significant.

Source: OECD, PISA 2025 Results (Volume I) (released 8 Sept 2026); Czech School Inspectorate (ČŠI) national report. 8,462 Czech students, 387 schools. 2022 comparisons affected by COVID-19 testing disruption.

What do we mean by curriculum?

- The term ‘curriculum’ means different things to different people depending on their context. Curriculum is text, pedagogy, assessment; it is what we actively do in different educational settings; **it is the totality of the learning experience** (Dempsey, 2023).

Majella Dempsey 2026

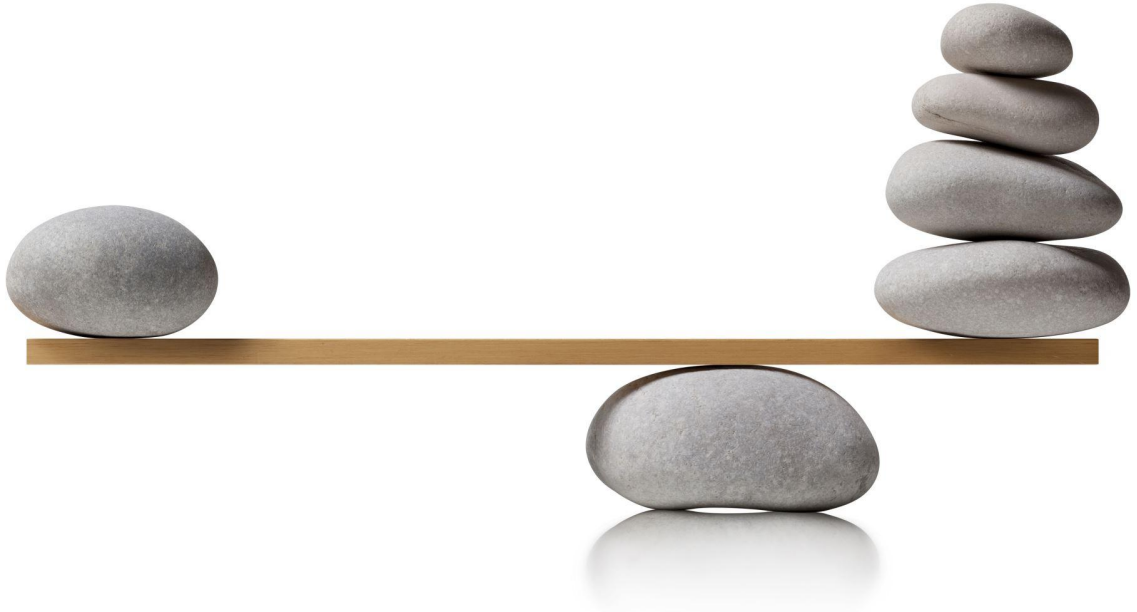
Curriculum is contested … this is good

In what ways is it contested in your school?

The balance between Curriculum freedom and Regulation

Too much regulation – impacts teacher professional identity

Too little regulation – causes undue stress on teachers and lack of coherence within the system



Curriculum Frameworks

- There is a need for **concise but clear curriculum frameworks** that offer well-defined direction and space for schools and teachers, in combination with **considerable investments into the curricular expertise of teachers and school leaders** to strengthen their capacity for utilising the space productively for school-based curriculum making.
- Those curriculum frameworks need justification in a coherent, **overarching vision of the main purposes of education.**

(Handelzalts et al., 2019; Biesta, 2022)

The purpose of education

The purpose of education – qualification, socialisation, subjectification (Biesta, 2015)

Schools as a space for young people to develop as individuals who can live in and with the world in their own way (Biesta, 2022)

To do this they need to learn something (curriculum) , from someone (teacher) and for a reason (Biesta, 2011). Without a sense of purpose, there may be learning but not education (Biesta, 2022).

Curriculum making

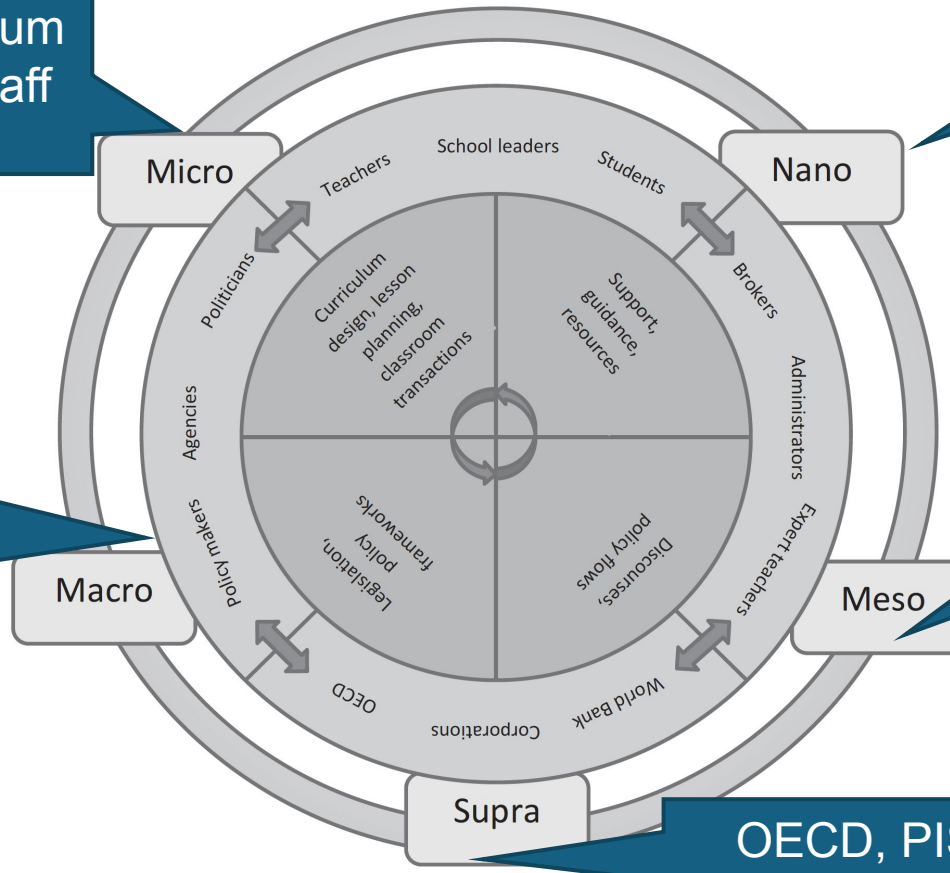
- There is a growing awareness of the complexities and timeframe involved in introducing, realising and sustaining curriculum change, **the learning processes of schools and teachers** needs to come to the forefront of curriculum improvement.
- Support must be continuous, contextual and collaborative (O'Donnell, 2026)

(Dempsey, 2023; Dempsey, Doyle and Looney, 2021; Handelzalts, Nieveen & Van den Akker, 2019)

Overlapping and connected sites of activity

School leaders, teachers, curriculum leads, support staff …

Students, parents, support staff, others …



Professional learning support Oide, subject associations, teaching centres, others …

Ministry DEY, curriculum body NCCA, State Examinations Commission, Teaching Council, Unions, Management bodies …

OECD, PISA, UNESCO, TALIS, others …

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Alvunger et al., 2021, p.275

Curriculum Making: Several Interacting Layers

- **Mediation of the national text** – deciding sequencing, emphasis, integration across subjects, and how flexibility (like the high-trust sequencing model in the Primary Curriculum Framework) actually gets used.
- **Role of school leadership** in creating the professional space and dialogue needed for **shared sense-making**
- People tend to encode new curriculum ideas into their existing practice **unless leaders deliberately build in time to challenge and rework that instinct** (Spillane et al., 2004; Spillane 2006).
- **Collegial interpretation** – teachers testing their reading of the curriculum against colleagues', which is often where the real "making" happens, since individual interpretation without that dialogue tends to just reproduce prior practice under new language.

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Ireland – sites of activity

1. National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) develops the Frameworks, specifications, and some support materials
2. Department of Education and Youth (DEY) supports curriculum implementation through:
   - Oide professional learning – 450 seconded teachers and leaders who work with schools in different ways
   - In school leadership positions for curriculum change
   - Inspections – reports
   - Network of Education Centres around the country
3. State Examinations Commission examine at two points:
   - Lower Secondary – Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (Age 15-16), low stakes
   - Upper Secondary – Leaving Certificate (Age 18-19), high-stakes examination for entry to Higher Education
4. Teaching Council (TC) sets professional standards, registration and accreditation for the profession

Others also support curriculum change

- Subject associations - https://imta.ie/
- Leadership bodies - https://www.napd.ie/, https://www.jmb.ie/, https://www.ippn.ie/ , https://www.cpsma.ie/ …
- 21 full-time and 9 part-time Education Centres in Ireland https://www.esci.ie/
- Teacher Unions - https://www.asti.ie/home/ , https://www.tui.ie/ https://www.into.ie/
- Private companies – education is big business

And in Czechia?

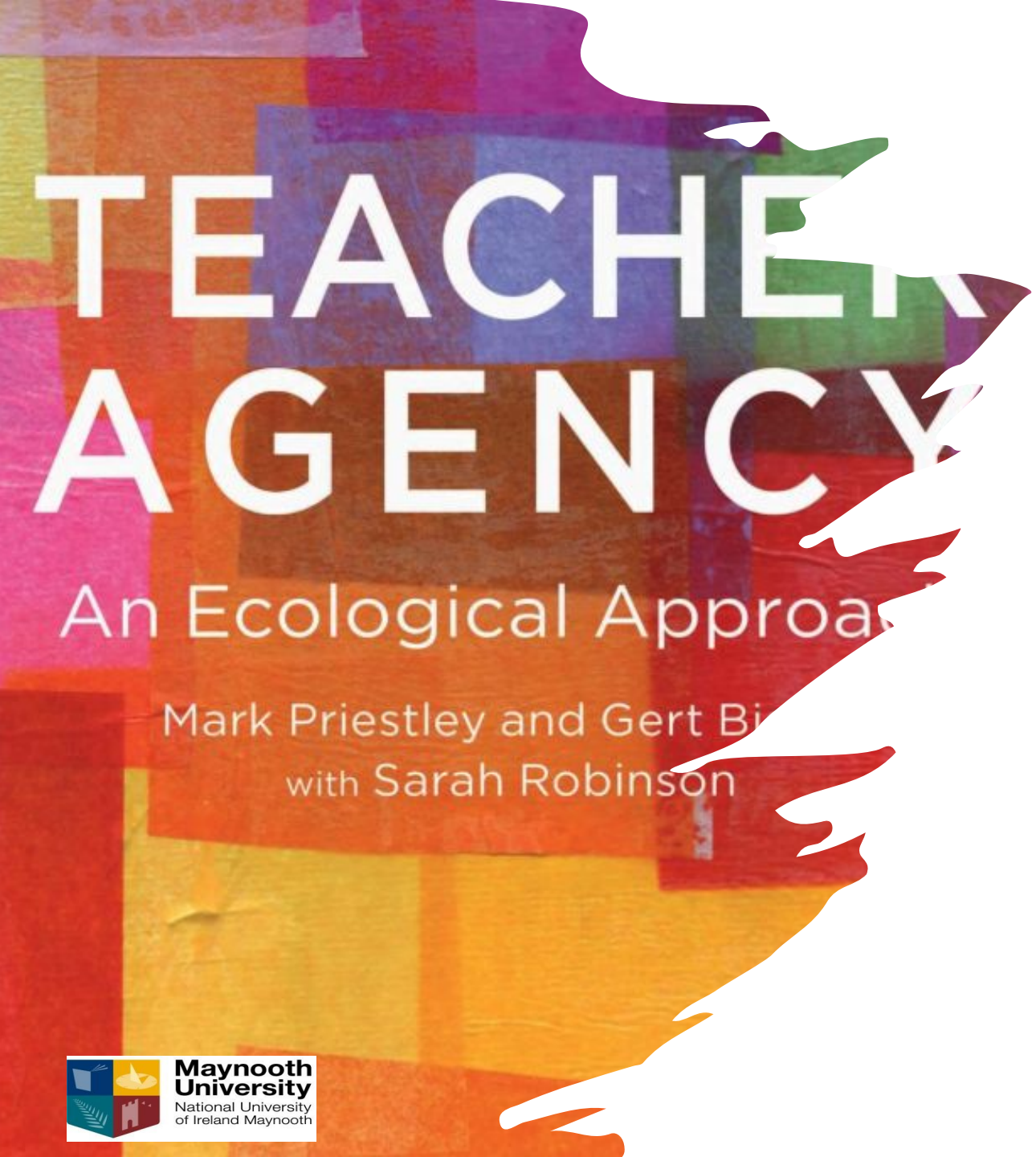
1. A two-level curriculum since 2004: the national framework (RVP) sets direction; each school writes its own school curriculum (ŠVP)
   - Czech schools already have long experience of school-level curriculum making
2. Revised RVP for basic education: voluntary from September 2025 (grades 1 and 6); the compulsory start has been pushed back
   - Support from National Pedagogical Institute and Ministry: model ŠVPs (final versions October 2026), regional teacher networks, webinars – see revize.rvp.cz
3. Questions for us:
   - *Is your ŠVP a living document or a compliance document?*
   - *Are model ŠVPs idea-suppliers or conditions-builders for your school?*
   - *Who makes the ŠVP in your school, and where is the time to do it?*

Curriculum making at school level

Curriculum making at school level is best understood as the process by which curriculum policy gets interpreted and enacted locally, rather than simply delivered or implemented as a finished product handed down from national frameworks.

curriculum as text, pedagogy, assessment, and the totality of the learning experience …..at school level all four come together in decisions that no policy document can fully specify in advance.

Teachers make the pedagogical decisions (See also Dvořák, 2015, 2021)



Teacher agency as ecological

- **Teacher agency as ecological**: what a teacher does with a curriculum framework depends not just on their own beliefs and expertise, but on the **resources, relationships, time and structures** available to them in that particular school, at that particular moment.
- The same national curriculum can be "made" quite differently in two schools depending on staffing, leadership culture, community context and collegial norms. (Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, 2026)

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Distinction between curriculum-as-planned, curriculum-as-enacted and curriculum-as-experienced.

School-level curriculum making sits mainly in that middle space, **enactment** – shaped by an awareness of the gap between what is planned nationally and what is experienced by students in the classroom.

The school's job is not to close that gap but to manage it thoughtfully, with **professional judgement rather than mechanical fidelity to the text.**

Curriculum reform does not equal policy implementation – it is an ongoing act of local interpretation, and **the school is where that interpretation is negotiated and made real.**

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Assessment: seeing what pupils are learning

Agree shared learning goals – a small number of goals across subjects and year groups, so teachers work towards the same ends and pupils hear one consistent message

Assess for learning, all the time – ongoing formative assessment shows where each pupil is and what to teach next; it is how we see the curriculum-as-experienced (Black and Wiliam, 1998)

Look at pupil work together – teachers review samples of work against the shared goals, building a common sense of quality that feeds back into planning (e.g. Junior Cycle SLAR meetings)

Three conditions for success – culture, structure, external support

- *Culture*: the goal is:
  - Professional learning communities (collaborative culture + accountability),
  - Avoiding permissive individualism (collaborative but no accountability),
  - corrosive individualism (neither),
  - contrived collegiality/performance training sects (forced collaboration) (Hargreaves, 2003; Dvořák et al., 2015; Dvořák, 2021).
- *Structure*: protected scheduled time, a suitable shared workspace, buffering from disruption, access to knowledge resources, and budget.
- *External support*: role of national bodies such as Oide, DEY, and NCCA: are they positioned as idea-suppliers, or as conditions-builders for local capacity? (Like your NPI)

Curriculum making processes

- Using Graeber's (2012) concept of "interpretive labour' ,Dvořák (2021, p.116) contends that *when mandated hastily, without appropriate support and attention to local context, and without the possibility of opting out, school-based curriculum development becomes highly problematic* (Dvořák, 2121, p.116)

Principles for school curriculum development

Curriculum development

- *Think big, but start small* – take one thing to work on such as literacy/ questioning/feedback across all subjects
- *One size does not fit all* – expect teachers to negotiate, make room for alternative solutions
- *Think broadly, but keep an eye on the pupils* – start from the young person and a vision for education (Handelzalts et al, 2019)

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Principles for school curriculum development

Teacher development

- *Work together* - consider necessary collaboration and planning skills needed, model these
- *Work in a cyclical manner*– pilot test collaboratively to support common experiences, revise and develop, make findings public, share them between schools (Handelzalts et al, 2019)

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School organisation development

- *Create a supportive school culture* – work with teams, be prepared for emotions, tensions and misunderstandings and act on them, notice initial successes and build on them
- *Create a supportive infrastructure* – Take care of facilitation, time for development and collaboration, inspiring work place, budget, communicate carefully
- *Provide external support* – bring in outside help if needed, collaborate with local universities, create the context for meaning making, broad and deep reflection, make knowledge gains explicit (Handelzalts et al, 2019)

Curriculum leadership efficacy

Meeting curriculum learning demands	Commitment to curriculum change and improvement Knowledge of the curriculum (meaning making) Understanding of how to respond Teaching capabilities – use these!
Leadership practices for realisation *(Sinnema & Stoll , 2020)*	Leading problem solving Engaging in robust discussion – interpersonal challenge, support and provoke Taking a strategic approach – policy coherent, critical, robust evaluation Ensuring curriculum collaboration – advice network expansion, diverse expertise awareness

Key messages

- **Curriculum is made, not delivered.** The national framework gives direction; schools and teachers make it real.
- **Agency is achieved, not possessed.** Culture, structure and support decide what teachers can do with the space.
- **Start small and work together.** One shared focus, in cycles, with assessment showing what pupils experience.
- **Teacher learning is pupil learning.** Success for every pupil is built here.

Bringing it together

Discussion

What structures, curriculum making teams, protected time, resources, leadership would most strengthen curriculum-making capacity in your own context?

Thank you

Questions

Majella.Dempsey@mu.ie

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