



Locating Australian school students in sites of curriculum making: a literature review

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Abstract

Young people and children are central to conceptualisations of curriculum as a social process, especially in school-based settings. However, students have tended to be on the periphery of education policy development more broadly and curriculum reform more specifically. As a more inclusive approach to engaging students in curriculum consultation processes is beginning to be taken in Australia, it is timely to gauge the extent to which students are being actively engaged as curriculum actors and research participants across the Australian curricular landscape. This article draws on Priestley et al.'s (2021) *sites of curriculum making* model to frame a systematised literature review of a decade of Australian academic and grey literature for the purpose of identifying the sites and activities in which students are active and/or the focus of research. The review suggests there is a small body of research on curriculum negotiation within school-based nano and micro sites of curriculum making. However, an absence of academic research related to meso and macro curriculum making means we have a limited understanding of the dynamics of the activities, interactions, contestations and power relations that constitute curriculum making in these spaces in relation to students. This article considers some of the reasons for and implications of these trends, including how existing curriculum and student voice scholarship might inform future research. It argues that a better understanding of the possibilities and challenges of student-centred curriculum making activities could assist in moving beyond superficial “consultation” methods, especially during periods of significant curriculum renewal.

Keywords Sites of curriculum making · Curriculum reform · Student voice · Student-centred research

Introduction

In 2023, Australia's four million-plus school students comprised just over 15 percent of the nation's population (ABS, 2024). Arguably their quotidian experiences of doing, making and living curriculum make them some of the nation's most important curriculum actors. Yet in times of curriculum reform, students' perspectives are the least likely to be heard. During the 2021–2022 Review of the Australian Curriculum, the loudest voices were those of politicians. Although students were invited to participate in the consultation process, only 184 students responded to the survey (ACARA, 2021). Policy discourse gives an impression of seeking to nurture student input into curriculum design within and beyond schools, but students are given a limited

role to play in policy development and, as they tend to be viewed as the objects rather than the participants of policy making (Welton et al., 2022; Zhao & Watterson, 2021), this positions ‘students as the missing actors in education reform’ (Zhao & Watterson, 2021, p. 113). Although curriculum inquiry has long been interested in students as curriculum makers, we might apply this provocation to curriculum renewal processes: *Are students the missing curriculum actors in curriculum review and reform?*

As the analysis presented in this article shows, students are not often foregrounded as research participants within the Australian context across a range of curricular domains and are only beginning to be invited to participate in the development of official curricula by state and national curriculum authorities. Framed by the overarching question—*How and where are Australian school students participating as curriculum actors and research participants across sites of curriculum making?*—this article draws on a systematised literature review and applies Priestley et al.'s (2021) *sites of curriculum making* to map out where

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students are engaged as participants across these sites. Based on these patterns, it then considers the implications of our limited knowledge of how students engage as curriculum actors in sites of curriculum making outside of localised school settings and in the development of official curricula. Green (2022) distinguishes these as two sites of curriculum practice—the everyday *classroom curriculum* and the *technical curriculum* at the policy level— and highlights that limited attention has been given to documenting the curriculum making processes of the latter. In contrast, curriculum scholarship has comprehensively critiqued the ways in which power dynamics exert influence on technical curriculum by interrogating ‘curriculum is a key site of ideological contestation between different visions of the world, and of self, and other’ (Hussain et al., 2024, p. 2). Bringing students into conversations about the technical or official curriculum potentially calls attention to the way these dynamics work to include and/or exclude a multiplicity of voices, both in terms of the discursive practices of the curriculum actors involved and the degree of polyvocality expressed within specific curricula. However, before considering the extent to which student participation in curriculum renewal at the policy level may or may not challenge the curricular status quo, it is important to establish if and how they are currently engaged as curriculum actors and where they are located in different sites of curriculum making.

The curricular experiences of children and young people are fundamental to understanding curriculum as a complex social process (Priestley et al., 2021). Despite post-structural conceptions that understand students as essential to sustaining the doing and being of curriculum, global policy discourse has been slow to recognise their importance to curriculum development and reform. UNESCO (2018) describes students as ‘direct stakeholders’ (p. 29) who influence curriculum decision making and similarly the OECD’s report *Student Voices on Curriculum (Re)design* (OECD, 2020a) notes they are ‘critical stakeholders’ (p. 2). Both organisations purport to advocate for departing from traditional approaches to the technical development of curriculum *products* based on standardisation, towards a more *process-oriented* approach that recognises individualised, non-linear learning pathways (OECD, 2020a, b; UNESCO, 2018), in which students are positioned as active participants with ‘agency and co-agency’ (OECD, 2020b, p. 9). Yet, we know inter-governmental organisations, like the OECD, have been complicit in sustaining these very processes through the standardisation of international testing and consequently narrowing and homogenising curricula and curricular practices (Rodríguez-Revelo, 2017; Sahlberg, 2012). Here the use of the neoliberal term ‘stakeholders’ reminds us that these global education policy discourses are more likely to reinforce rather than disrupt standardisation, competition and marketisation (Reid, 2019) and as such,

inter-governmental organisations are unlikely to lead curriculum reform innovation.

This article conceptualises students as *curriculum actors* involved in the complex processes of *curriculum making*, key terms that will be defined below. The next section on students and curriculum inquiry positions this article within the field. It is followed by details of the methodological approach, including how sites of curriculum making (Priestley et al., 2021) are used to frame this systematised literature review. The analysis sections identify the extent to which students can be located as research participants within Australian academic literature and as participants in curriculum reform activities within grey literature. The final sections critically reflect on the possible reasons and implications of these trends. Although the curricular context is Australian, the article draws on some international illustrations and tackles critical questions relevant to diverse curricular contexts. Overall, it argues that if we seek to make students feel more connected to, or part of, the curricular landscape they inhabit—especially in times of uncertainty—curriculum making processes and research needs to be more responsive to the potential challenges and opportunities that greater engagement of student curriculum actors might bring.

Students and curriculum inquiry

It is becoming somewhat truisitic to note that, more than ever, education and therefore curriculum needs to be awake to the uncertain present futures young people are facing globally (e.g. Cairns, 2021; Brennan, 2022; Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020; NESA, 2020; Zhao & Watterson, 2021). Writing about curriculum responsiveness in the context of the Covid crisis, Pinar (2021) argues, Covid was also a curriculum crisis which prompted us to ‘rethink, restructure and reimagine what curriculum is and can be’ (p. 301). Pinar (2021) concludes: ‘In light of this, must not the student—the individual person—remain central to any conception of curriculum, to any organisation of pedagogical communication, indeed to the very project of education itself?’ (p. 308). Pinar underscores two key points here: the dynamic nature of curriculum and the perennial centrality of the student to curriculum.

Students have long been fundamental to conceptualisations of curriculum. Although these cannot be expanded upon in detail, they include notions of the negotiated curriculum (Boomer, 1982), curriculum as lived (Aoki, 1993), experienced curriculum (e.g. Nuthall, 1997), classroom curriculum (Deng, 2012; Westbury, 2000) and curriculum co-creation (Bovill, 2013), and have shaped understandings of the intersecting domains and dimensions of curriculum. Boomer’s curriculum-as-negotiation was particularly groundbreaking (Green, 2021). By envisioning curriculum as a dynamic and dialogic process of ‘curriculuming’

(Boomer, 1992, p. 150 cited by Green, 2021), Boomer invites students *into* curriculum, for the purpose of enhancing learning and democracy in the classroom—a notion that has been revisited by curriculum scholars more recently (see Bron et al., 2022).

As students predominantly experience curriculum in their classrooms and school communities in relation to their teachers, student-focused curriculum inquiry has naturally emerged from within school-based settings (e.g. Biddulph, 2011; Brooker & Macdonald, 1999; Bron et al., 2016; Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). This approach tends to focus on the interests and life-worlds students bring to their learning and encourages them to take an active role in deciding what gets learned and how (see Mockler & Groundwater-Smith, 2015). Bron and Veugelers (2014) encapsulate five rationales for involving students in classroom curriculum design based on claims that they have ‘the right to have a voice in matters that affect them’ (p. 135); they are ‘developmentally ready’ (p. 135); their participation can provide ‘opportunities for voices that are often marginalized to speak and those who customarily hold positions of power to listen and to hear’ (p. 135); and that participating in decision-making processes contributes ‘to the development of citizenship and 21st Century Skills’ (p. 135). While compelling, these benefits must also be considered in relation to the socio-political conditions in which students experience curricular decision-making.

The political rationale identified by Bron and Veugelers (2014) assumes that including young people in curriculum design can assist in rebalancing the power relations that shape how and where this engagement occurs. While the notion that curriculum development agendas are shaped by ‘a hierarchy of influences based on power relations between stakeholders’ (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999, p. 84) is well established, the need to address the asymmetry of these relations remains an ongoing challenge. Expanding student participation in national curriculum conversations is one way of drawing attention to this imbalance but also brings with it new questions and complexities concerning the power dynamics of student participation. There is also a danger that, motivated by the desire to transform curriculum, we might overestimate the capacity of research with student participants to demonstrably influence curriculum making. For example, this supposition is expressed in the work of Araneda et al. (2019), who used school-based samples of student participants to evaluate the extent to which the national curriculum in Chile aligns with student interests. Engaging students with questions about their subject selection and their ‘ideal curriculum’, they argue, ‘is key if we are to develop a more contextualised curriculum that makes more sense to the students’ (Araneda et al., 2019, p. 345). While I agree with this aim and have made similar arguments in my own research (Cairns & Garrard, 2024; Cairns

& Weinmann, 2023), such claims assume that eliciting student perspectives potentially informs curriculum renewal on a large scale. Correspondingly, the degree of influence teachers can have through official curriculum consultation processes is also an ongoing concern, with recent research from Norway suggesting teachers’ input gets backgrounded (Finnanger & Prøitz, 2024). Similarly, research from Finland (Säily et al., 2020) found that ‘the idea of a democratic and truly crowdsourced curriculum design process did not succeed as intended’ (p. 854) owing to issues with transparency and a lack of modification based on public consultation. My previous research with senior secondary History teachers in the wake of the first review of the Australian Curriculum in 2014, also highlighted that most teachers were skeptical about their capacity to affect curricular change through consultation processes (Cairns & Weinmann, 2023). Reflecting on these shortcomings and asymmetries impels us to more comprehensively problematise the power relations this work purports to be dismantling, and although this literature review cannot deal with these complexities in depth, it hopes to stimulate further research in this space.

Flynn’s (2017) work in Ireland is constructive for thinking about how students might have more substantial input into curriculum development. Although Flynn is not the first to explicitly apply the concept of student voice to curriculum, unlike some of the above examples, their research responds to ‘a paucity of international research indicating any routine collaborative engagement with students in second-level education on curricular development’ (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 43), that is, at a systemic scale. The development of a curriculum consultation model that is sustainable and embeds a culture of listening is challenging and takes time (Flynn, 2017). If students are to have input into education discourses at the national level it requires significant cultural shifts, including establishing dialogical, decision-making spaces at the school and system level, and developing a common language and understanding (Flynn, 2017).

Any discussion of students and curriculum making lends itself to the use of terms such as student voice, participation and engagement, which of course can be varyingly conceptualised and contested. As the focus of this article is on mapping the contours of the curriculum literature, it is not within its scope to provide a detailed analysis of how it intersects with literature from the well-established field of student voice research. Student voice initiatives have typically focused on school participation and less on curriculum, though as student voice has become integral to many aspects of education and schooling it has increasingly featured in curriculum research (Biddulph, 2011; Lundy & Cook-Sather, 2016). With its emphasis on student decision-making and leadership, student voice can be understood as a pedagogical practice and school reform strategy; however, its claims to improving educational inequalities have been

critiqued (see Finneran et al., 2023). In their critical examination of the politics of student voice, Mayes (2023) actively ‘troubles’ the ‘mis/uses’ (p. 41) of student voice in education research and school reform. Although the complexities of student voice cannot be explored here in detail—as others have demonstrated in this journal (e.g. Brennan, 2022; Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020)—it is a concept and field of research that should continue to be in dialogue with curriculum inquiry.

Sites of curriculum making

Drawing on the latest transnational research on curriculum making, I apply Priestley et al.’s (2021) *sites of curriculum making framework* to the Australian context as an analytic lens for a literature review. Although the framework evolved with European curricular contexts in mind, it acts as ‘a heuristic rather than a normative framing’ (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 8), and has been developed to better ‘understand the considerable variation from country to country’ (Priestley et al., 2021 p. 14). This makes it adaptable to other parts of the world.

With the intention of disrupting thinking that stratifies curriculum into linear levels, the framework utilises ‘a particular typology for curriculum making, which construes the curriculum, as a collection of social practices, as something that is made – which happens – across multiple layers of social activity’ (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 8). Each site—supra, macro, meso, micro, nano—is described in terms of activities and actors. This approach challenges outmoded conceptions of teachers and education leaders as passive implementors or conduits of curriculum and instead foregrounds ‘they are *making* the curriculum within their contexts alongside a number of other social actors, including their students’ (Priestley et al., 2021, p. 2). The term *actor* emphasises that curriculum making involves actions or processes of enacting and interacting. The approach also encourages the tracing of the flows of practices and movements of actors across and between sites. By mapping the Australian literature to these sites, we start to get a sense of where students are (under) valued as curriculum actors and research participants across the Australian curriculum landscape. While the review is organised according to the following site descriptions, it does not claim to detail the complex interactions that characterise these sites or seek to theorise curriculum making in relation to student voice.

As alluded to above, *nano* curriculum making has been a key site for engaging student actors. It typically occurs in classrooms and other learning spaces, through pedagogic and curricular interactions between teachers and students (Priestley et al., 2021). Similarly *micro* curriculum making occurs at the school level through the lesson planning and curriculum programme design done by teachers, school

leaders and principals (Priestley et al., 2021). *Meso* curriculum making involves actors, such as governments, education departments, curriculum authorities, subject-area associations and resource publishers, in leading curriculum making and the production of guidance and resources (Priestley et al., 2021). For example, in my state context the Department of Education and Training Victoria and the Victorian curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) are key actors in this space. At the *macro* site of activity, national governments and curriculum authorities are involved in developing curriculum policy frameworks and legislation (Priestley et al., 2021). Key actors include the federal government, the Australian curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Education Council, composed of state and federal education ministers. However, state-based curriculum authorities, curriculum resource developers, education researchers, educational bodies, teachers and students also contribute to macro curriculum making activities, particularly during periods of review and consultation. At the *supra* site of activity, the generation of transnational curricular discourse and policy borrowing, lending and learning occurs, often through the activities of the OECD, UNESCO and the World Bank (Priestley et al., 2021). It is this site of curriculum making that is most influential on the homogenisation and standardisation of policy discourses globally (Priestley et al., 2021), as noted above.

In the edited collection, Priestley et al. (2021) present the framework first as a table and then, to further emphasise curriculum making as a non-linear and non-hierarchical model, offer an alternative circular diagram in the concluding chapter (Alvunger et al., 2021). The latter visualises a more fluid rendering of the ‘rich ecologies of education systems’ (Alvunger et al., 2021, p. 275) with their dynamic interplay of sites, actors and activities of curriculum making. Owing to the structure of this literature review, I have not been able to capture this fluidity. Rather the framework is utilised to specify the types of locations/sites and activities represented by the literature. Priestley (2021) also addresses a criticism I observed when applying the framework, which is ‘that we place students merely in the nano site, suggesting that they are (and perhaps should be) only involved in curriculum making in the classroom’ (para. 2). This they say, ‘was not our intention’ (Priestley, 2021, para 2). Thus, applying the framework in a student-centred mode prompts reflection on how young people might become more active in sites of curriculum making beyond school.

Systematised literature review

Coupling the *sites of curriculum making* framework (Priestley et al., 2021) with a *systematised* literature review provides a complementary thematic framework for the review. Unlike

systematic literature reviews, which are large scale reviews conducted according to strict criteria and explicit methodology, systematised reviews take a more streamlined approach (Sataloff, 2021). Similar to a scoping or mapping review, a systematised approach is useful for ‘organis[ing] initial understanding of a topic and its available literature’ (Sataloff, 2021), making it apt for the purpose of this research.

The review analysed academic and grey literature. First, peer-reviewed academic literature was identified according to inclusion criteria: published since 2010; empirical research; conducted in Australia; school students as participants; situated in macro, meso, micro and nano sites of curriculum making. Second, to supplement the lack of literature related to meso and macro sites, I extended the review to include grey literature related to these sites. In the context of education research, grey literature is characterised by non-commercially or non-academically published material—including policy, reports, curriculum documents, guidelines, webpages, media releases and speeches—and is often undertaken by government agencies, think tanks and educational organisations (White et al., 2013). The grey literature was more narrowly defined by the following inclusion criteria: published since 2010; published by Australian organisations; focus on curriculum consultation at the meso or macro sites; involvement of school students in public consultation.

To ensure currency and coverage of the period since the Australian curriculum was developed, 2010–2023 was selected as the timeframe. School students are defined here as primary and secondary school students from Foundation to year 12, across government and non-government schools. Databases searched included Ebscohost, A + Education, Google Scholar and Google. An extensive range of search terms were used in combination with Boolean operators. Although I will not list them here exhaustively, the search terms centred around the key concepts of *students*, *curriculum*, *curriculum reform*, *negotiated curriculum*, *curriculum making*, *student voice* and *student participants*.

The sites of curriculum making framework (Priestley et al., 2021) guided data collection and analysis.

Notwithstanding the structure of this literature review, I do not assume that the curriculum making activities reported on within the literature neatly fit into these sites, nor am I suggesting that the authors make these sorts of distinctions. Rather, I am employing the framework to gauge where there is evidence of students doing the sorts of activities that characterise these sites.

While this article presents the findings of a systematised review, its aim is not to explicate the method and analysis of these studies, rather, it is to contemplate the implications of the identified patterns. Although the study utilised the same method to identify and analyse international literature, it is beyond the scope of this paper to compare both in detail. Another limitation concerns the scope of the literature

review. Some articles may have been overlooked if they did not explicitly relate to curriculum or students. For example, there may be projects that include students within the research design or investigate curriculum-related problems (particularly discipline-based projects), but they may not be picked up in searches if they are not related to key word identifiers.

Student-centred research on nano and micro curriculum making

As they share schools as their primary location and because in most studies there was an overlap of curriculum making activities across both sites, nano and micro curriculum making are combined here. Although school-based sites draw the largest number of articles about student-centred research, the review still only identified nine articles that met the inclusion criteria (Ayalon & Wilkie, 2020; Duncombe et al., 2023; Grainger et al., 2018; Kohn, 2017; Mahat et al., 2023; Mayes, 2013; McCumstie et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2022; Whatman & Singh, 2013). As school-based curriculum making is not the focus of this paper I will not expand on these in detail, other than to make the following observations. Most of the of articles focused on curriculum making activities centred on the co-design or negotiation of curriculum between students, teachers, school leaders and other members of the school community (Duncombe et al., 2023; Grainger et al., 2018; Kohn 2017; Mahat et al., 2023; Mayes, 2013). For example, a Queensland study of Year 10 students’ perceptions of a student negotiated learning program designed to build 21st century capabilities argued ‘student voice gathered in this study [via survey data] provided valuable lessons’ (Grainger et al., 2018, p. 443) about the enactment and experience of an innovative approach to teaching and assessing the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities in terms of new approaches to curriculum integration, communicating their relevance to students and enhancing student enjoyment.

Only a few studies centred on the evaluation of curriculum programs (Ayalon & Wilkie, 2020; Robinson et al., 2022; Whatman & Singh, 2013). Whatman and Singh’s (2013) study evaluated the relevance and responsiveness of health and physical education curriculum for girls, and by centring on interviews with Indigenous female students in a Torres Strait Islander community, as well as other curriculum actors, it sought to listen to an often-marginalised group. The study highlighted the potential of school and community-based research to challenge deficit discourses around First Nations educational ‘disadvantage’ and challenged the researchers to shift the focus onto the ‘power and control relations operating within schools’ (Whatman & Singh, 2013, p. 227.)

Across these articles, data collection methods involving students included observation, online surveys, participatory and design workshops, focus groups, and semi-structured interviews. The use of a participatory research design by Mayes (2013) engaged students in collaborative inquiry to explore the concept of the hidden curriculum and was utilised by Mahat et al. (2023) to co-design learning and teaching activities for career education was particularly distinctive. Both offer insights into curriculum making as a distinctly social practice. Students actively engaged in curricular decision-making alongside school staff and carers (Mahat et al., 2023) and participated in collaborative inquiry to investigate the nature of curriculum, including debating if students should be involved in curriculum design (Mayes, 2013). Future work on student-centred curriculum making could certainly be informed by the insights and methodologies represented in this selection of research literature because it engages with the complexities and tensions that characterise student-centred research and provides powerful illustrations of student curriculum actors at work.

Student-centred research on meso and macro curriculum making

Only a few articles relate to what we might describe as state and national curricular practices. Dargusch et al.'s (2011) project involves students judging educational materials in relation to judgements made by the Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing. While it does not appear to be on curriculum making per se, when aligned to the curriculum making framework we can see it reports on an important element of meso activity: 'the production of guidance and materials to support curriculum making in schools' (Priestley et al., p. 18). Taking up a 'user-centred design in keeping with the focus on student voice' (Dargusch et al., 2011, p. 47), the research design replicated the judging criteria and process of the awards. The authors highlight that there was a significant alignment between the evaluations of the students and the professional judges and that students developed agency. However, there was a missed opportunity to reflect on if and how students might be more authentically engaged in curriculum making activities as actual judges in future or in the production of curriculum materials.

The two other articles report on national student surveys. Although national surveys are a common instrument used to investigate adolescents' perspectives about their lives on a large scale, they have not been used extensively by education researchers for asking students about their experiences for the purposes of transforming state or national curricula—though as we will see below they are being increasingly used by curriculum authorities for this purpose. The article by Ezer et al. (2019) is implicitly about curriculum making

from the perspective of students as it reports on school-based sexuality education as part of the findings from the Fifth National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health, completed by 2,193 Australian Year 10, 11 and 12 students. The authors 'sought to describe the national experience of sexuality education including the context in which the curriculum was delivered' (Ezer et al., 2019, p. 598) and concluded students 'wanted better school-based sexuality education' (p. 611). The final article is based on a national online survey about senior secondary History that aimed 'to gauge student attitudes and curricular experiences' (Cairns & Garrard, 2024) and was completed by 292 Australian student participants. It contributes insights into the reasons for stagnating enrolments in senior History subjects across the country, enables the juxtaposition of student voices with those that comprise the dominant political discourse, and ascertains if students perceived history curriculum to be relevant to their lives (Cairns & Garrard, 2024).

Although these surveys do not claim to be representative, they have some limitations. For example, student surveys, and other student-centred methods, might be more likely to attract exemplar or empowered students while silencing the voices of unempowered students (Feldman, 2022), as well 'as lead to the "adulteration" of findings' (Flynn & Hayes, 2021, p. 49). National surveys may provide space for student participants to reflect on their nano and micro school contexts within meso and macro settings, but their efficacy in terms of shaping curriculum -making within these sites is tenuous. The impact of young people's input relies on other curriculum actors—such as those responsible for curriculum development within curriculum authorities—taking notice of, and responding to, the published findings. Although the translation of research into curricular practices or formal curricula may be an aspiration of researchers, it can be difficult to demonstrate this when curriculum authorities do not explicitly articulate how curriculum development is informed by research. It is also noted that there is no academic literature available about the engagement of student actors in curriculum making activities related to the development and review of the Australian Curriculum.

A grey area

The scarce research on student participation in meso and macro curriculum making that explicitly deals with curriculum renewal contrasts with the increasingly inclusive approach curriculum authorities and education departments are taking with students through public curriculum consultation processes. I therefore shift the attention to the grey literature produced by these considerably powerful curriculum actors or "stakeholders"—as they tend to be referred to in these documents—to complete the mapping.

According to ACARA, ‘consultation plays an integral role in establishing the directions for the design and development of the curriculum’ (2023, para.1). Although consultation is not the only form of macro curriculum making activity, it is a key site of contestation and to some extent makes more visible the social practices and relationalities that shape the national curriculum landscape at particular points in time. The Australian Curriculum has been reviewed twice since it was introduced in 2010. The 2014 Review was initiated by the Coalition’s then Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, and conducted by reviewers Kevin Donnelly and Ken Wiltshire, who were sympathetic to the government’s intentions. One part of the review process involved an open invitation for public submissions, of which more than 1600 were received (Donnelly & Wilshire, 2014). Although students could have made a submission, they are unlikely to be aware of this invitation, given it was only publicised on the *Students First* review website and in advertisements in the *Weekend Australian* and *Australian Financial Review* (Donnelly & Wilshire, 2014)—newspapers that attract an older, conservative readership. There is also no reference to student feedback in either of the reviewers’ reports. Student representatives were conspicuously absent from the stakeholder list in the second more targeted phase of consultation (see Appendix 1, Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, pp. 255–256), even though students were identified in a list of ‘stakeholders in curriculum governance’ (Donnelly & Wiltshire, 2014, p. 82).

The recent 2020–2021 review was also initiated by a coalition government and then education minister, Alan Tudge, but the consultation process was overseen by the University of Queensland (ACARA, 2021). The consultation included a

public survey and included students in the open invitation to participate during the 10-week public consultation process from April to July 2021 (ACARA, 2021). Without a dedicated student survey or other student-centred methods, it is unsurprising that only 184 students from across the country responded to the survey. Figure 1 collates the available data to indicate the number of student respondents across the curriculum areas and the percentage of students in proportion to all respondents (ACARA, 2021). Interestingly the cross-curriculum priorities received the highest number of responses. As the feedback is synthesised in the consultation reports it is not possible to discern student-specific perspectives, I will leave it to others to speculate why this might be. The resulting consultation reports are also somewhat scant on detail about how the feedback was translated into V9.0.

In contrast, the *NSW Curriculum Review: Consultation Summary Report 2018* (ARTD Consultants, 2019) represents ‘a broad community conversation’ (p. 5). Among the range of consultation and engagement activities, it included targeted engagement with young people including focus groups, school visits and an online survey (ARTD Consultants, 2019). Students comprised 9.6 per cent of respondents, though the age profile shows that only 1.3 per cent of respondents overall were aged 15 and under (ARTD Consultants, 2019). The Final Report (NESA, 2020), notes ‘the new curriculum should be developed collaboratively and ‘owned’ by the widest possible range of NSW stakeholders’ (p. xviii), emphasising in bold ‘especially teachers’ (p. xix). The report outlines how key community concerns informed the draft curriculum, and similar to the Australian Curriculum Review reports, it

Fig. 1 Number of student survey respondents in Australian Curriculum Review 2021 (ACARA, 2021) and percentage they represent of total respondents

AC REVIEW: CURRICULUM DIMENSIONS	NUMBER OF STUDENT RESPONDENTS	STUDENTS IN PROPORTION TO OVERALL RESPONDENTS
English	10	1.1%
Mathematics	6	0.9%
Science	3	0.6%
HASS	1	0.3%
The Arts	0	0%
Technologies	0	0%
Health and Physical Education	6	2.6%
Languages	0	0%
General Capabilities	3	3.2%
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures CCP	114	10.8
Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia CCP	16	11.2
Sustainability CCP	25	8.1%
TOTAL STUDENT RESPONDENTS	184	

does not indicate the impact of student input explicitly and there are no direct quotes from young people among those from other stakeholders. Public consultation was also a feature of the recent Year 9–12 course renewal in Tasmania (Tasmanian Government, 2019). Although there is indication that students were involved in a separate consultation in 2019, like NSW, there is no information available about their input and the summary of the curriculum framework consultation survey only quotes teachers (Tasmanian Government, 2019). This means the curriculum making activities and contributions of students remain indiscernible.

Victoria has also taken steps to acknowledge student voice in relation to curriculum development. In 2019, it was announced that the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) board would include a recent Victorian secondary school graduate as a youth representative (State Government of Victoria, 2022). A blog post on the Victorian Student Representative Council's Student Voice Hub, indicates that the initiative was one of the six priorities identified by students at the 2018 Congress which 'centered itself around greater student involvement in the area of curriculum' (Zaituna & Wren, 2019, para.2). As the first youth board member, undergraduate university student, Aayushi Khillan says: 'Ultimately education is for us, so it makes sense that we have some kind of role in deciding what we learn' (Carey, 2019, para.5). This sentiment is echoed by Education Minister James Merlino who says the appointment 'shows that the views of students are central to the decisions we make about what is taught in our classrooms' (State Government of Victoria, 2022, para. 10). Although this role is not available to current school students, it reflects a shift towards somewhat more inclusive curriculum consultation practices. Students were also foregrounded in the 2022 *Consultation for Senior Secondary Reform* (State Government of Victoria, 2022): 'We invite *students*, parents, caregivers, schools [...] to provide feedback to the discussion papers' (State Government of Victoria, 2022, para.11; own emphasis). Despite these reforms now being finalised, a consultation report is not available to evaluate the extent to which students accepted the invitation.

This grey literature could therefore be said to represent a grey area of curriculum reform in Australia: the input of student curriculum actors across meso and macro sites of curriculum making and the impact it has on the development of formal curricula and/or system-level curricular conversations is ill-defined. The perspectives of "stakeholders" other than students appear to be privileged in the consultation reports and is possibly symbolic of the ambivalence of more powerful curriculum actors towards meaningfully including young people.

The challenges and possibilities of engaging students across sites of curriculum making

This systematised review of academic and grey literature in relation to Australian contexts has ascertained that there is a small body of research that centres secondary students—not children—as research participants predominantly in the nano/micro sites of curriculum making, as well as a handful of studies that utilise student participants in meso and macro sites. If the inclusion criteria were expanded to include higher education contexts, we would see that there is considerable interest in engaging tertiary students in curriculum making and co-construction. While there is a growing body of consultation reports detailing school curriculum reviews, there are no examples of empirical or theoretical studies that investigate student involvement in macro curriculum making activities in relation to what might be called the state or institutional level of curriculum making (Priestley et al., 2021). This indicates curriculum inquiry scholarship has an important role to play in working with curriculum actors to articulate the dynamics of the processes, interactions, contestations and power relations of curriculum making in these spaces. The absence of primary school students within the research literature is also significant. Gardiner and Ohi's (2023) recent article in this journal makes an important contribution in this space; however, being a critical discourse analysis it was not included in this review. As a response to the non-existence of Australian curriculum inquiry with primary students and a 'dominant ideology that views young children as incapable of "voicing" their opinions' (Gardiner & Ohi, 2023, p. 3) they highlight that this research deficit limits the availability of information and resources available to teachers who want to augment student voices through curricular practices in primary settings.

Ethical and accessibility challenges may be a reason that the student-centred research base remains small. Understandably, any 'research involving children and young people raises particular ethical concerns' (Australian Government, 2023, p. 67) around consent, coercion and maturity, and requires research methods that adhere to the guidelines provided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (Australian Government, 2023). University ethics committees are therefore likely to carefully scrutinise research with students, potentially deterring some researchers. Organisational consent might also be perceived as a potential barrier for those seeking to work with students in schools, particularly government schools. The 2022 data indicate 64.5 per cent of students were enrolled in government schools, followed by 19.7 per cent in Catholic schools and 15.9 per cent in independent schools (ABS, 2023). In the government and Catholic

sectors, organisational consent must first be obtained from the relevant state-based department of education or the relevant Catholic Education, Diocesan or School Authority and then from school principals and parents. However, as researchers can approach independent school principals directly, this may be seen as less onerous. In reference to youth climate activism research, Feldman (2022) highlights that this can influence selection bias and reduce participation of public/government school students. Gaining approval from departmental administrators is recognised as being especially arduous and time-consuming and may result in an over reliance on independent schools for participants which represent more advantaged student populations in urban areas (Feldman, 2022). The cessation of research in schools for three years owing to Covid-19 and remote learning also restricted collaboration with students and reinforced that school-based research should not be burdensome for teachers and students at any time. The methodology of future student-centred curriculum inquiry will therefore need to grapple with such practical, ethical and philosophical concerns (see Feldman, 2022; Mayes, 2023).

Another reason the dynamics of student curriculum making at meso and macro sites has not been the focus of academic research or otherwise is because the inclusion of school students in curriculum consultation is still in its nascent in Australia. Although some might describe the tepid inclusion of students in the recent review of the Australian Curriculum as “tokenistic”, Lundy (2018) suggests the concept ‘may offer a useful and sometimes necessary step on the journey to more respectful and meaningful engagement with children’ (p. 340). Rather than explaining children’s non-participation as tokenism, Lundy (2018) argues the focus should be on the tokenistic behaviour of adults, suggesting ‘de-tokenization’ (p. 348) requires a cultural shift in which more meaningful participation is grounded in dialogue with feedback that is full, child-friendly, fast and followed up. Building on Lundy’s (2007) earlier children’s rights-based model that advocates for young people having space, voice, audience and influence, Flynn’s (2017) model for transformative dialogue also includes avoiding the *adulteration* of their perspectives, instead emphasising feedback, facilitating change, and pursuing and facilitating further dialogue.

What is not yet evident in the above ACARA, NSW, Tasmanian and Victorian examples is the extent to which young people received feedback on if, and how, they influenced the development of new curricula. We can, however, look to one Australian example that took a more assiduous approach to dialogic participation. In 2017, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government embarked on the development of a ten-year strategy on the future of education (ACT Government, 2018), which was not included in this review as the focus was not on curriculum per se. Aiming to gather diverse

ideas from across the community, the consultation methods that targeted students included: invitations to schools to provide student feedback and drawings; a video booth set up in primary and secondary schools; and ministerial conversations that involved the ACT Minister of Education speaking directly with students in schools (ACT Government, 2018). In phase 1, almost half of the 5000 participants were students (ACT Government, n.d.). A second phase of consultation also allowed participants to engage with the phase 1 data and clearly articulated what students wanted; this informed the development of the strategy, which clearly articulates what students should notice following its implementation (ACT Government, n.d.). We might also look to Aotearoa/New Zealand for an innovative example of how young people from diverse communities have been at the forefront of the recent curriculum refresh. A Youth Voices Group—composed of up to 30 young people with lived experiences of being Māori, Pasifika, resettled and disabled—established their own ways of working and decided how feedback would be provided to other curriculum actors (Mana Mokapuna, 2024).

While I am not suggesting these models are perfect, they demonstrate that a vital starting point for meaningfully engaging student actors begins with a targeted form of dialogue, that is not only “student-friendly” but empowers students to have input into the design of these processes. This would require a significant change in attitudes and actions by the most powerful curriculum actors. Further, it can be argued that ‘closer engagement with the realities and possibilities of diverse sites of curriculum making is critical to reposition teachers and students as intellectual agents and challenge the prevailing policy legitimisation and discursive domination of macro curriculum making in current top-down curriculum policy practices’ (Garrard et al., 2024, p. 12). This is perhaps something curriculum inquiry research can influence by communicating the richness and value of student perspectives and their lived experiences of curriculum. Based on a project with senior secondary students in Northern Ireland and Wales, Barrance and Elwood (2018) argue their findings show that ‘students have sophisticated perspectives on curriculum’ (p. 33) and ‘wished to be consulted on such matters within three different contexts: national, school, and individual’ (p. 33–34). On the other hand, as noted above, research shows that curriculum consultation processes are not always as ‘open, democratic and deliberative’ (Säily et al., 2020, p. 842) as they could be and are not necessarily made more democratic by the inclusion of selected or self-selecting young people, who may not even wish to be “consulted” on curricular matters. Important questions that future work in this space might grapple with include: *Do students care about curriculum renewal in and beyond their schools? How useful will their perspectives be? Which students or whose voices are in/excluded? What equity and inclusion issues are raised? How will student*

input make a difference and how will they know if it does? How are student perspectives mediated through other curriculum actors including researchers?

Conclusion

Circling back to the overarching question –*How and where are Australian school students participating as curriculum actors and research participants across sites of curriculum making?*—the interpretation offered by this literature review suggests that in Australia, we are yet to comprehensively engage and value students as curriculum actors across *all* sites of curriculum making. Thus students—especially primary school students—can be described as the missing curriculum actors in curriculum reform. It suggests curriculum researchers are continuing to build on the foundations laid by curriculum researchers like Garth Boomer in terms of exploring how students are negotiating and making curriculum within the overlapping nano and micro sites but indicates we have less understanding about their (limited) activities in meso and macro spaces. As indicated by the analysis of the grey literature, curriculum “policymakers” and “stakeholders” are demonstrating some interest in inviting students into curriculum review processes, though in most cases are not yet working with them to develop the sort of curriculum making activities or “consultation methods” that young people and children might view as worthwhile. Further, the prospects of purposeful student engagement at supra sites of curriculum making, including with the transnational policy actors referred to at the beginning of this article, will be contingent upon this work being done across the other sites. Priestley et al.’s (2021) sites of curriculum making framework has provided a compass to navigate the literature and locate evidence of the sorts of activities student curriculum actors are doing and the extent to which this is reported on. While this systematised literature review is limited in its application of the framework, in this context the framework is efficacious for alerting us to areas of student-centred curriculum inquiry that would benefit from future research.

If in Australia we seek to ‘detokenise’ (Lundy, 2018) the involvement of students in curriculum making we need to take up Brennan’s (2022) challenge ‘to identify and create spaces for curriculum inquiry as active knowledge practice that, with future-problem focus, builds collaborative engagement with students’ (p. 86) both in and beyond school communities. Further curriculum research and student engagement in these spaces also needs to be informed by the expertise of scholars working in student voice and youth sociology. As this scholarship has shown, engaging students in decision-making about their educations is underpinned by complex social and political dynamics and power

differentials making student voice ‘simultaneously transformational and problematic’ (Mayes, 2023, p. 10). However, with its interest in grappling with ‘the infinite possibilities and complexities that emerge when social actors engage in curriculum as a meaning-making activity’ (Priestley & Philippou, 2018, p. 159) curriculum inquiry is poised to deal with these challenges. The terms of reference of the most recent Review of the Australian Curriculum F-10 states the review’s purpose is ‘to ensure it [the Australian Curriculum] is still meeting the needs of students’ (ACARA, 2020, para.2). If we do not engage them in the conversation, we will not know if it does.

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