Editorial

On the 6th December 2016 the results from the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in science, reading and mathematics were published (https://www.oecd.org/pisa/). The results in previous years have been followed by politically charged debates about the quality of education within a country and inevitable comparisons of different approaches to education. Similar discussions are likely to follow the announcement of these latest PISA results. These discussions provide an example of the politicised nature of education on a global scale. Political pressures nationally are particularly evident at times of curriculum, assessment and pedagogical reform and are underpinned by particular values and beliefs about the importance of certain types of knowledge, how best to acquire such knowledge and how to assess it. This issue includes articles from Sweden, Finland, England, Malta and Australia that in different ways explicitly or implicitly explore the socio-political nature of educational change and the opportunities and challenges of curriculum and assessment reforms.

Fredholm, the author of the first article, explores what he suggests is a mismatch in alignment between the political definition of schooling and aspects such as culture, economic relations and other public interests in Sweden. According to Fredholm school politics in Sweden has recently taken a conservative direction, emphasising the importance of conventional school subjects, stronger teacher authority and more discipline in the classroom. He also points out that this conservative approach is often criticised as misleading and behind the times in relation to contemporary knowledge demands. Fredholm examines this critique and argues that the political notion of schooling seems to be decoupled from the broader domain of public demands on education. The second article also explores the interrelation between implementation strategy and the function of the reform. Pietarinen, Pyhältö and Soini highlight the complexity of enacting curriculum change through their investigation of curricular coherence and alignment of purpose, shared vision and consistency in the decision-making of the stakeholders involved. They suggest that implementing curriculum reform entails translation of new ideas into new educational practices which requires complex sense-making processes of all stakeholders involved. They argue that the reform process should create spaces for sense-making and they urge all those involved to consider the effects of reform and imagine the consequences of curriculum change on the reality of everyone's work.

In the third article, Fenwick considers political pressures on curriculum and assessment reforms in Australia. She suggests that governments aim to use standards as an accountability tool to measure the extent to which schools are improving student outcomes. Fenwick argues that much of the research on standards-based reforms has focused on the effects of high stakes testing and that one of the main effects of testing is that the curriculum enacted by teachers is narrowed as they increasingly teach to the test. Her study focused on standards-based reforms to schooling that are part of official curriculum-making processes. In particular, she analysed teachers' assessment practices that evolved within the planned curricula for senior secondary schooling in the Northern Territory of Australia during standards-based reforms. Her findings indicate that the inclusion of subject-based performance standards in the curriculum for senior schooling did not result in teachers planning a curriculum that included assessment practices for actively engaging students in learning. She concludes that the teachers in the study believed that the performance standards only became useful to students if there was a connection made at the individual task level. The focus on assessment processes continues in the fourth article. El Masri, Ferrara, Foltz and Baird's article considers the challenges of predicting item difficulty in science subjects in national curricula. They suggest that predicting item difficulty has been tormenting test developers for a long time. The authors' study involved the analysis of 216 science items of key stage 2 tests, which are national sampling assessments administered to eleven year olds in England. El Masri et al. emphasise that

understanding what makes an assessment task more or less challenging for students is important for teachers' pedagogical decisions in supporting learner development and for test item developers seeking to design tests that best reflect the construct to be assessed. Potential predictors (topic, sub-topic, concept, question type, nature of stimulus, depth of knowledge and linguistic variables) were considered. Their findings suggest that while a substantial part of unexplained variance could be attributed to the unpredictable interaction of variables, they argue that progress in this area requires improvement in the theories and the methods employed. El Masri et al. highlight the main methodological limitations for building predictive models and they suggest that a way forward is to provide evidence of the strengths and limitations of coding frameworks and reveal weaknesses of rating processes in order to improve them.

The focus of the fifth article is on the implementation of curriculum in different languages as a means to strengthen bilingualism within a globalised society. Ferugia and Mifsud consider language choice for science education from the perspectives of policy and practice in Malta. The authors explain that the Maltese national curriculum aims to strengthen bilingualism by reinforcing the practice of teaching and assessing some subjects in English and others in Maltese. Ferugia and Mifsud point out that as the national curriculum framework was being developed some educators were concerned that language could be a possible barrier to student progress. In particular, it was suggested that the teaching of science in English should be reconsidered. The author's study sought to investigate language choices, function and code switching in science lessons. Their findings showed that in state schools 12-13 year old students were being taught science predominantly in Maltese while reading, writing and formal assessments were in English. Ferugia and Mifsud found that students who were more exposed to English, irrespective of class stream, used this language more frequently than those who were less exposed to the language. They suggest that teachers who were concerned about the use of another language may have been overcautious. They conclude that while switching between languages may be necessary initially to provide technical terms and serve as a bridge between two languages, eventually teaching science using English could lead to a more precise and formal use of English and enable both learning of science and the development of bilingualism.

Citizenship continues to have prominence in curriculum reform processes in many countries and is the focus of Peterson and Bentley's study in South Australian public schools. The authors explain that the first ever federal Australian curriculum to be developed includes Civics and Citizenship as a new subject. Peterson and Bentley conducted a pilot study of senior leaders and teachers of 11-14 year olds students in a small sample of primary and secondary schools, exploring their perceptions and current approaches to education for citizenship. Following the analysis of their data they made three main conclusions: while school leaders and teachers value education for citizenship, they do so for different reasons; schools place values as central to education for citizenship; and community involvement is typically understood as occurring within rather than beyond the school. The importance of values is increasingly central to education for citizenship in a number of countries as is consideration of declarations and conventions on human rights. Robinson, in the seventh article, argues that in national and international contexts, knowledge and understanding about school-based human rights education is lacking. The author makes the observation that debates around the social construction of childhood lead to differing perspectives about the extent to which children and young people are perceived as capable holders of human rights. Considering different theoretical positions she says that from a post-structuralist perspective, the sociological debate hinges around two main opposing perspectives - where children are either viewed as 'becoming' adults, or where they are perceived as social agents in their own right. The aim of her article is to explore how key principles inherent in human rights declarations and conventions are translated into practices within school contexts in England. She argues that translation from discourse to practice opens up the potential for children and young people to encounter inequitable experiences

of human rights education, and emphasises that this is an ethical issue that needs to be addressed. Robinson also points out that human rights education relates to both direct teaching about human rights, and to children and young peoples' experiences of how school practitioners acknowledge and uphold their rights. A textual analysis of a range of identified relevant documents was conducted by Robinson to find out which elements of rights are presented and pronounced and to identify the implied responsibilities for practitioners in relation to human rights education. From her analysis of the findings she developed a theoretical framework which makes a contribution to developing understanding of human rights education practices within schools.

In the final article of this issue turn the focus is on careers education which is seldom at the forefront of thinking during curriculum reform processes. Reiss and Mujitaba suggest that schools have a number of functions but one that is key is to help prepare young people for their lives when they leave school. They argue that in the UK careers education is currently not strong in most schools for a number of reasons and as a result, too many young people make subject choices for post-16 study that they subsequently regret. In particular, the authors believe that fewer young people choose post-16 science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM subjects) than might do with improved careers education. They draw on the findings of two research projects ASPIRES and UPMAP conducted in England and suggest that embedding careers education in STEM lessons may be a solution.

The book review included at the end of this issue carried out by Aaron Koh continues the theme of politicisation of curriculum reform. The review is of a book edited by Leonel Lim and Michael Apple which was published in 2016. It is entitled, *The Strong State and Curriculum Reform: Assessing the Politics and Possibilities of Educational Change in Asia.* Koh's review indicates that the assumption of a 'strong state' associated with its power to dictate curriculum reform and define what constitutes 'official curriculum' is put under scrutiny in the book.

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