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# Role of transnational and national education policies in realisation of critical thinking: the cases of Sweden and Kosovo

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## ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of the push from the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development for competence-based curricula, this article problematises the complexity of developing twenty-first century skills, such as critical thinking, by addressing the role transnational and national policy contexts play in realising critical thinking in the national contexts of Sweden and Kosovo. The article distinguishes between *policy-critical thinking* and *civic-critical thinking*. Relying on analyses of curriculum and policy documents, it is concluded that while in the Swedish context critical thinking competence (or ability) seems to be much more implicit than explicit, in Kosovo, the national curriculum makes explicit references to *thinking competences* as a form of policy-critical thinking and *civic competencies* as a form of civic-critical thinking. Thus, students in both contexts have opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Furthermore, Sweden emerges as a *divergent case* and Kosovo as a *convergent case* with regard to transnational policy flow research paradigms.

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## Introduction

With 'A New Skills Agenda for Europe', the European Commission (EC) doubled down on its push toward more skills-based education as a '[...] pathway to employability and prosperity' (EC, 2016, p. 2). In the Agenda, 'skills' are defined broadly as what a person knows, understands and can do. Emphasis on skills-based approaches was initiated in the mid-90s by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) under the leadership of Jacques Delors (Delors, 1996). This was followed by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) project on Definition and Selection of Competencies (DeSeCo) (OECD, 2005), which then led to the European Reference Framework of key competences (Official Journal

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of the European Union [OJEU], 2006; also revised in 2018, see OJEU, 2018). This paper aims to problematise and show the complexity of developing twenty-first century skills and critical thinking specifically by conceptually addressing the role of transnational and national education policy contexts in realising critical thinking in the European context. The concepts and definitions related to twenty-first century skills are far from clear and uniform, and as a result, references are often made depending on the organisation that is pushing for the specific reform. In the literature, we find terms such as '21<sup>st</sup> century skills', which most often include critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning [P21], 2015). In its documents, the EC focuses on eight 'key competences': (1) Communication in the mother tongue; (2) Communication in foreign languages; (3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; (4) Digital competence; (5) Learning to learn; (6) Social and civic competences; (7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship and (8) Cultural awareness and expression' (OJEU, 2006, p. 13)<sup>1</sup>.

Interestingly, the use of the term 'competence' and the plural form 'competences' varies between OECD and EC reports and those published by UNESCO, in which the terms 'competency' and 'competencies' are used. Other references are made to 'generic skills', which are often taken to mean skills that can be applied across a number of domains. These include skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, problem solving and adaptability. However, 'generic skills' are referred to differently in different national contexts. For example, an Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (2003) report found that 'generic skills' are defined as follows:

Core skills, key skills, and common skills in the United Kingdom; Essential skills in New Zealand; Key competencies, employability skills, and generic skills in Australia; Employability skills in Canada; Basic skills, necessary skills, and workplace know-how in the United States; Critical enabling skills in Singapore; Transferable skills in France; Key qualifications in Germany; Trans-disciplinary goals in Switzerland; and Process-independent qualifications in Denmark (ANTA, 2003, p. 2).

More recently, UNESCO has referred to these skills as 'transversal competencies', which in turn include skills such as critical and innovative thinking, global citizenship, interpersonal skills, intrapersonal skills and media and information literacy (Care & Luo, 2016). Dispositions, on the other hand, have been defined not based on the abilities that people have but rather on how they (and students) are disposed to use those abilities (Perkins, Tishman, Ritchhart, Donis, & Andrade, 2000). Furthermore, Perkins, Jay, and Tishman (1993) define critical thinking as a core dispositional learning outcome. Overall, 'critical thinking' appears across a number of perspectives, and as a result it will be the focus of our analysis in this study. In line with Care and Luo (2016), the term is further operationalised into creativity, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness, application skills, reflective thinking and reasoned decision-making.

### ***Purpose and research questions***

The purpose of this article is to explore the recontextualisation of the transnational concept of 'critical thinking' in two different national curricula. The study is situated in the research field of comparative curriculum research. More specifically, it compares

the transnational policy level with national adaptation rather than comparing the two country cases to one another. There are three criteria for the choice of countries: first, Sweden and Kosovo have been active within the European context in terms of their educational reforms toward standards- and competence-based curricula; second, the two authors have been actively involved in researching curriculum reforms in the two countries and third, the two countries have different histories and thus have different relations to international organisations promoting 'international' discourses of educational policy, e.g. one EU member state (Sweden) and one non-EU member state (Kosovo).

The article addresses two main research questions. First, to what extent do transnational policies affect national education and curriculum policies? Second, how do different curriculum theoretical underpinnings affect the potential of curricula to realise the transnational policy concept of 'critical thinking'?

In the next section, context and policy flows to education in Sweden and Kosovo are elaborated, followed by a literature review and a presentation of the theoretical framework and methodological design. Then, the findings of the two case studies are provided. Finally, the article ends with a discussion and conclusions.

Contexts and transnational policy flows in education in Sweden and Kosovo

In *Sweden*, the concept of knowledge, which constitutes the base for the two most recent curriculum reforms, Lpo 94 and Lgr 11, is developed in a report called *School for Bildung* (Official Report, 1992, p. 94). What was new in the debate of what constitutes knowledge at school at that time was the emphasis on knowledge as composed of cognitive factual knowledge, knowledge as meaning making, abilities related to practical situations and knowledge as tacit familiarity. The message to the curriculum-makers was that these four aspects of knowledge are complementary and that all four need to be considered in teaching situations and assessment.

The purpose of providing this background on the discussion of knowledge in the Swedish curriculum is to demonstrate that this discussion was largely inspired by contemporary research on different forms of knowledge. Thus, there were no obvious influences from transnational actors such as the EU or the OECD on this matter, although the research field in itself is always international. This may be the reason that the Swedish National Agency for Education (NAE) did not include the concept of competences in curriculum reform Lgr 11. The NAE notes that the term 'competence' has gained ground through the key competences elaborated by the EU and the OECD; however, the NAE explains that the concept of competence is very close to the concept of knowledge already outlined in the Swedish curriculum in terms of 'a knowledgeable and engaged acting in a certain practice' (Report U2009/312/S, 2010, p. 15). Thus, the NAE continues to use the term abilities<sup>2</sup> instead of introducing the international concept of 'competences'.

While an international policy concept of competence did not renew the Swedish curriculum, another international phenomenon had a greater influence: the performance model of learning outcomes. In the most recent curriculum reform, Lgr 11, the syllabi contain predetermined 'knowledge requirements', stipulating what students need to know in grades 1, 3, 6 and 9. This adaptation to a transnational trend of focussing on learning outcomes instead of curriculum content has had wide-ranging effects on the Swedish school system (Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018).

Kosovo has gone through two cycles of curriculum reform in the past two decades: the New Kosovo Curriculum Framework of 2001 and the Curriculum Framework for Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo of 2011. Both documents were developed with the heavy involvement and direction of international donor organisations that have been assisting in Kosovo education reform since the end of the war in 1999 (Tahirsylaj, 2018). The 2011 Kosovo Curriculum Framework (KCF), which was also revised in 2016, was developed with international technical support and expertise from UNICEF and UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE), even though Kosovo had declared its independence in 2008 and had its Ministry of Education in place (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology [MEST], 2011). The KCF departed from the previous content-based approaches and subject-based curriculum and fully embraced a competence-based approach to curriculum making, considering the latest EC recommendations on the eight key competences. As a result, after some adaptations of the EC key competences, six key competencies—the plural 'competencies' here matching UNESCO's designation due to the involvement of UNESCO IBE's consultants—were introduced into the Kosovo curriculum: (1) Communication and expression competencies; (2) Thinking competencies; (3) Learning competencies; (4) Life-, work- and environment-related competencies; (5) Personal competencies and (6) Civic competencies (MEST, 2011). In turn, these competencies were linked to producing effective communicators, creative thinkers, successful learners, productive contributors, healthy individuals and responsible citizens, respectively. The 2011 Framework stated that 'Competencies involve an integrated and coherent system of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are applicable and transferable. They enable students to cope with the challenges of the digital age and with the knowledge-based labour market in an interdependent world' (MEST, 2011, p. 16). Furthermore, it was noted that the key competencies envisaged in the KCF were derived from the general aims of pre-university education in Kosovo and defined the main learning outcomes that learners need to achieve in a progressive and consistent way throughout the pre-university educational system. The 2016 revision of the Framework only incorporated some modifications based on the piloting of curriculum in a limited number of schools and fully maintained the focus on key competencies.

Beyond the curriculum reform, other aspects of Kosovo education have also been influenced and shaped as a result of transnational education policy flows and the heavy involvement of the donor community in Kosovo. For example, Kosovo introduced external standardised testing at the end of Grades 5, 9 and 12 in the 2000s, with technical and financial support from the World Bank, to increase school accountability and monitor student performance. The World Bank also assisted in the decentralisation process of Kosovo education through the delegation of decision-making from central government to municipalities. Furthermore, Kosovo participated in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for the first time in 2015—and performed poorly. However, Kosovo's participation was made possible by the financial and technical support of the World Bank and the German International Development Cooperation (GIZ). Other donor organisations have also contributed to other educational domains. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been involved in reforming school-based assessment, focussing on learning assessment

rather than the assessment of learning approaches, and the EC, through its European Agency for Reconstruction in Kosovo, has assisted in curriculum implementation and teacher professional development. The 2011 competence-based curriculum has been fully implemented in Grades 1, 6 and 10 in all schools in Kosovo since 2017.

A description of the two contexts as well as an overall summary of the developments related to key competences in Europe are provided to set the stage for the more specific analysis of specific curriculum and policy documents at the country level in order to examine which transnational policy concepts were adopted and adapted in Sweden and Kosovo.

Furthermore, the globalisation process has been pinpointed as the source of trends in transnational policy flows (Verger, Novelli, & Altinyelken, 2012). There are two schools of thought that have dominated the global education policy discourse and research, which focus on the convergence and divergence of each, respectively. The convergence paradigm was developed by world society theorists, who argue that a single global model of schooling is emerging worldwide as a result of the spread of culturally embedded model of the modern nation-state (Anderson-Levitt, 2003). Meanwhile, the divergence paradigm was developed by culture-centred theorists, who argue that educational policy borrowing does not follow a linear path. Instead, the context in which those policies are implemented shapes which policies are implemented and to what extent (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Therefore, it is relevant to examine which path the two national contexts presented here follow as a result of participating in and being affected by transnational policy borrowing.

### ***Literature review and theoretical framework***

National curricula—and subjects within them—rely on specific conceptions of knowledge. In the literature, there are three prevailing conceptions of knowledge that have been dominant in the educational discourse since ancient Greece: the *disciplinary*, *practical* and *experiential* conceptions of knowledge (Deng & Luke, 2008). *Disciplinary knowledge* entails canonical academic knowledge contained in intellectual disciplines. Testing the validity of knowledge is a primary concern of disciplinary inquiry (Deng & Luke, 2008). For Aristotle, this conception of knowledge is characterised as *episteme*, that is, formal knowledge for the purposes of understanding and explaining the world (trans. 1941, Book IV, as paraphrased in Deng & Luke, 2008). The character of critical thinking within this knowledge tradition is an epistemic form of criticism. *Practical knowledge* in turn construes knowledge ‘in terms of knowing what to do in practices and actions, with an emphasis on the application of knowledge to practical and socio-cultural problems’ (Deng & Luke, 2008, p. 69). Following a narrow interpretation, procedural knowledge of what to do in practice is in accordance with Aristotle’s term *techne*. Wisdom, on the other hand, deals with being human and that which is subject to deliberation. Aristotle characterised this conception of knowledge as *phronesis*, which refers to practical wisdom in specific practical and complex situations (Aristotle, 1941, trans., Book VI). In the practical knowledge tradition, critical thinking involves acting and making choices based on deliberate decisions about what seems to be the best way to act in specific sociocultural contexts. Finally, experiential knowledge

**Table 1.** Curriculum perspectives with historical and present influence on purposes of schooling, curriculum content and definition of subject matter.

Academic rationalism	Social efficiency	Humanism	Social reconstructionism	Didaktik tradition
Transmission of disciplinary knowledge of a canonical body of disciplinary knowledge, technique and way of knowing	Preparation of future citizens with requisite skills, knowledge and capital for economic and social productivity. Subject matter defined as practical or instrumental knowledge and skills that possess functional and utilitarian value.	Development of individual learners who pursue personal development, self-actualization, innovation and creativity. Subject matter defined as learning activities.	Use of education for social reform: emphasis on socio-cultural contexts rather than on individual needs of learners. Subject matter defined as a learning experience, where students are engaged in meaningful learning experiences that might generate social agency.	Teachers' work directed by the concept of Bildung, concerning the formation of mind and habit of learners. Subject matter as curriculum framework/content to realise its educative potential as interpreted and given life by teachers through Didaktik analysis.

Source: Adapted from Deng and Luke (2008).

focuses on 'the social and cognitive, dispositional and practical elements entailed in making sense of the phenomena of everyday life' (Deng & Luke, 2008, p. 69). This third conception of knowledge is primarily based on the work of John Dewey, who saw knowledge creation as a socially constructed process in situations where learners draw knowledge and ideas from intersubjective experiences that are meaningful and important to them (Dewey, 1966). This pragmatist concept of knowledge includes reflection and critical inquiry in all experiences that can be termed *an* experience and not only an occurrence. In this sense, knowledge emerges as a reasonable conclusion of critical inquiries into possible alternative consequences of an experience (Deng & Luke, 2008).

Furthermore, following Deng and Luke (2008), we frame the discussion on the potential of education systems to realise critical thinking around curriculum and Didaktik traditions, where curriculum is elaborated along the lines of four main overarching perspectives—academic rationalism, social efficiency, humanism and social reconstructionism—and Didaktik refers to a European-based framework for curriculum-making at the classroom level. Table 1 summarises the key points under each of these five curriculum perspectives.

Upon examination of the core ideas of each of the five curriculum perspectives presented in Table 1 and the three conceptions of knowledge elaborated above, it becomes clearer what the conceptions of knowledge and twenty-first century skills in general, as well as specific competences such as 'critical thinking', refer to. From the curriculum perspective, twenty-first century skills are related to humanism and social reconstructionism to some extent, but they are most closely connected to the social efficiency that highlights the instrumental value of education. In turn, from the conceptions of knowledge perspective, twenty-first century skills fall under practical knowledge. When practical knowledge is more related to procedural knowledge for handling situations in practice, it can be conceptualised as 'techne' (social efficiency). On the other hand, when practical knowledge refers to individual (or social/political) wisdom and deliberation in handling complex situations, the concept of 'phronesis' is

more appropriate (social reconstructionism). Next, 'critical thinking', which is the core competence in focus in this study, is further elaborated.

### ***Two perspectives of critical thinking***

The term 'critical thinking' in transnational policy contexts is associated with meanings such as creativity, entrepreneurship, resourcefulness, application skills, reflective thinking and reasoned decision-making (EC, 2018; OECD 2005). We call this type of critical thinking 'policy-critical thinking'. With this designation, we emphasise that this is a specific type of critical thinking, indicating a desirable critical approach of the future labour force with the primary aim to promote the attitudes of innovation and entrepreneurship for the development of partly new business sectors. Policy-critical thinking is related to generic abilities, which can be applied to a wide range of work and life contexts in terms of being 'open-minded' and able to identify, clarify and analyse a certain problem. Policy-critical thinking can be understood as skills based on a technical and context-independent view of critical thinking (see Winch, 2006). A closely related term to policy-critical thinking is 'thinking skills', a transversal skill designed to identify key elements of a reasoned case, select and analyse plausible solutions and draw conclusions. Thinking skills draw heavily on logic and argument analysis skills (Lim, 2015). Policy-critical thinking is related to a practical conception of knowledge, interpreted in a narrower way as understanding a set of procedures or skills (*techne*) (Deng & Luke, 2008).

The second type of critical thinking, which we call 'civic-critical thinking', focuses instead on considerations of equity, empathy and care. In civic-critical thinking, the aim of education is to involve students in thoughtful discussions on just and unjust laws and on decent and unfair ways of treating one another. This second type of critical thinking is closely related to a broader quest for the virtuous citizen and the good society, analysing patterns of domination and unfairness hiding in our everyday lives and looking for alternative ways for handling actual social problems related to diversity and categories of gender, race and ethnicity (Parker, 2003). The aim of civic-critical thinking as part of curriculum is to develop a sense of mutual respect between students and to create a space for meaningful dialogues regarding real problems in people's everyday lives and in society. This type of thinking builds on a critical rationality that includes the wider social consequences of what one is doing. Moreover, it involves handling uncertainty in social concerns (*phronesis*); thus, civic-critical thinking is context-dependent (see Winch, 2006). Civic-critical thinking is related to a practical conception of knowledge, interpreted in a broad way as solving socio-practical problems in people's lives. To an even larger extent, the concept is integrated in the pragmatist conception of experiential knowledge, with an emphasis on individuals as social actors in reflexive transactions with their social and physical environments (Deng & Luke, 2008).

### ***Methodological design***

The document analysis focussed on two European national contexts—one country with a long history of being an independent state with a national curriculum



(Sweden) and one state with a very short and more disputed independent position and thus a basically new national curriculum (Kosovo). Sweden and Kosovo have both been active in their curriculum reform, design and revision processes in the recent past and thus represent rich case studies to explore how the curriculum policy in the countries has been shaped by trans-national policy flows in education. The article primarily focuses on dissecting policies related to national curriculum, teacher education and school curriculum in the two countries. More specifically, we have examined documents related to two cycles of national curriculum reform in the past two decades in Sweden and Kosovo, respectively, as well as other curriculum documents and education policies, such as national core curriculum documents. The analysis is conducted within the national education systems of Sweden and Kosovo broadly and within the Grade 9 and Grade 7 mother tongue curriculum in each country, respectively. The subject of mother tongue was chosen because it is a subject of debate, being understood alternately as a skill subject and as a subject of democracy, characterised by critical reflections on different kinds of texts and media messages.

First, we turn to the syllabi of university teacher education programmes focussing on teacher education for teaching mother tongue and/or main official language—Swedish and Albanian, respectively—in lower secondary education or International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 2, which primarily covers Grades 6–9. The reason for this is to examine the consistency in the interpretation of critical thinking starting in teacher education, then in the general parts of the national curricula and, finally, in the syllabus of the mother tongue. As a second step, the overarching goals and norms for education in the curriculum for compulsory school were analysed. Finally, Grade 9 (and Grade 7 in Kosovo’s case) mother tongue school curricula (or syllabi) were examined to explore if, how and the extent to which critical thinking was covered in the two respective national contexts. University courses within teacher education represent locally decided course plans. In Sweden, teacher education as a whole is regulated by the Parliament (Government Bill 2009/10:89). Thus, the course plans in different disciplines are parts of state-governed education, with fairly high correspondence between universities. Similarly, in Kosovo, teacher education programmes are regulated by the government, and only public universities, such as the University of Prishtina, are accredited to offer teacher education. Furthermore, the programmes are highly similar across public higher education institutions.

### ***Findings from the two case studies of Sweden and Kosovo***

Prior studies have shown that the emphasis of the EC/EU on key competences, learning outcomes and skills-based education has had an influence on education policies across EU member states (Gordon et al., 2009; Pepper, 2011). Therefore, the latest EC push will likely continue to build on previous strategies for affecting national education policies within the European context. Next, we present the findings from our analyses of curriculum documents, teacher education programmes and mother tongue syllabi in Sweden and Kosovo.

Critical thinking in two national curriculum frameworks and educational policies.

## The Swedish curriculum for compulsory school, Lgr 11

The Swedish curriculum consists of five parts: the school's values and assignment, overall goals and guidelines for school, preschool class, recreation centre and syllabi for the different subjects, including knowledge requirements. In the first part of the Lgr 11 curriculum, the school's values and assignment, it is stated that the students should be able to orient themselves in a complex world that is changing rapidly with increasingly digitised information flows. The school's assignment includes encouraging students' creativity, curiosity and self-confidence so that they will want to try to turn ideas into actions and solve problems. Therefore, it becomes important that the students acquire methods for using new knowledge. This approach is part of a wider international approach of lifelong learning. In this context, it is necessary for students to develop their ability to critically review information and facts and to learn to assess the consequences of different options. In a 2017 revision, a digital perspective was added to the curriculum for compulsory school. All students should be given the opportunity to develop their ability to use digital technology. In addition, they also should be given the opportunity to develop a critical and responsible approach to digital technology so they can discover the possibilities and realise the risks of digitisation as well as evaluate the information they encounter on the internet. In doing so, students will be given the opportunity to develop an approach that promotes entrepreneurship (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 9).

In the second part of the curriculum, the overall goals and guidelines for school, some goals are stated as the responsibility of the school, which each student should have reached before leaving compulsory school. One of these goals that each student in Swedish compulsory school should have reached by grade 9 is the ability to make use of critical thinking and independently formulate viewpoints based on knowledge and ethical considerations (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 13). In contrast to the formulations of critical thinking above, this goal of critical thinking is not directly related to societal change and digital information flows. Instead, this goal can be considered as more general. However, if this goal is thought of as an ability—a skill—there will also be a lack of meaningfulness: critical thinking in relation to what? Critical thinking without direction and content may become a superficial ability to acquire logical reasoning techniques in an instrumental way, where the means for argumentation come to the fore while what is argued *for* becomes less important. Regarding the role of citizens, it is creativity rather than a critical approach that is emphasised: The school, in collaboration with the homes, should promote students' versatile personal development into active, creative, competent and responsible individuals and citizens (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 9).

In the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school, Lgr 11, the meaning of critical thinking is generally understood in terms of 'policy-critical thinking', with its connotations of creativity and entrepreneurship. Only in a passage in the section for the recreation centre is the term 'critical' clearly related to 'civic-critical thinking' regarding ethnicity, gender and patterns of consumption. The curriculum includes a general aim stating that the students should be able to use critical thinking for formulating independent standpoints based on knowledge and ethical considerations. However, without linking this disposition to a purpose that can impart critical thinking a weight and

importance that goes beyond purely logical–technical skills, this goal remains within the sphere of policy-critical thinking and thinking skills as transversal skills built on logic for reasons. The critical abilities are in accordance with the conceptualisation of knowledge as *techne*, that is, as procedural knowledge, rather than the conceptualisation of knowledge as *phronesis*, referring to reflected and deliberative wisdom.

### **The Kosovo curriculum framework for pre-university education**

The KCF for Pre-University Education in the Republic of Kosovo (MEST, 2011) is an umbrella document that stipulates, first, the overall role, function and structure of the curriculum, and second, the implementation of the reforms contained therein. Upfront, the KCF declares *Knowledge Society* to be both an aspiration and a challenge for Kosovo; however, it is noted that schools support this knowledge society through students' mastery of competencies. In this vein, the term 'competencies' takes central stage in KCF, and knowledge is understood only as a sub-component of the competencies, where 'Competencies involve an integrated and coherent system of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are applicable and transferable. They enable students to cope with the challenges of the digital age and with the knowledge-based labour market in an interdependent world' (MEST, 2011, p. 16). This conceptualisation of competencies and their accompanying knowledge, skills and attitudes focussing on application and transferability mark the transition of the Kosovo curriculum approach from the disciplinary conception of knowledge in the previous curriculum to a practical one. 'Critical thinking' appears as a phrase only once in the document in reference to the development of 'critical thinking skills' within the curriculum area of natural sciences.

Overall, the KCF defines six key competencies that cover and permeate the entire pre-university schooling experience. According to our definitions of policy-critical thinking and civic-critical thinking, two key competencies in the KCF are particularly relevant: *thinking competencies* and *civic competencies*. Specifically, the KCF defines thinking competencies through a set of sub-competencies, including 'Exercising mathematical competence, as well as basic competencies in science and technology; Exercising digital competencies; Understanding, analysing, judging, synthesising; Developing abstract thinking; Making information and evidence-based decisions; Linking decisions with their consequences; Assessing and self-assessment; and Problem-solving' (MEST, 2011, p. 16). Furthermore, it is noted that thinking competencies support students in knowledge management as a way to identify and access appropriate information/knowledge sources, wherein 'learners need to develop their capacities to approach knowledge critically, creatively and interactively' (MEST, 2011, p. 18). This conceptualisation of thinking competencies maps well with policy-critical thinking as a generic ability that can be applied in a wide range of areas, even though the KCF seems to initially relate thinking competencies with mathematical and science and technology competencies. The analysis of the Languages and Communication curriculum area, which includes the subject of mother tongue, revealed that no specific reference is made to critical thinking per se. However, it is noted that all six key competencies defined by KCF should be achieved through each of the subjects in the

curriculum area, which in addition to mother tongue also include English, Albanian for students of the non-Albanian community and a second foreign language. Regarding civic competencies, the KCF defines them with the following set of sub-competencies:

Competencies for interpersonal, cultural, and social relationships; Understanding and respecting diversity among people; Exercising tolerance and respect for others; Assuming accountability for issues of general public interest, responsibility and civic participation; Tolerating and undertaking useful changes in one's private life, for an entire society and for the environment. (MEST, 2011, p. 17)

Furthermore, the KCF underlines that this set of competencies enables students to act as responsible citizens by taking into account both their immediate and wider contexts, which is well aligned with our designation of civic-critical thinking centring on equity, empathy and care and on the broader quest for a good society. Indeed, the KCF defines the outcome of this set of civic competencies to be a 'responsible citizen', and it is intended to be mastered primarily through civic education. Admittedly, the KCF definition of civic competencies and designation of 'responsible citizen' divert from the prior research on citizenship education curricula, which differentiates between the personally responsible citizen, participatory citizen and justice-oriented citizen (see Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, for an in-depth elaboration).<sup>3</sup>

An examination of Kosovo Core Curriculum for Lower Secondary Education (MEST, 2016) covering curricula for Grades 6–9 further elaborates on the specific learning outcomes associated with each of the six key competencies set in the KCF according to the two main key stages under lower secondary education (ISCED 2): key stages 3 (called Further development and orientation and including Grades 6 and 7) and 4 (called Reinforcement and orientation and including Grades 8 and 9). Similarly to the KCF, the lower secondary core curriculum document refers to policy-critical thinking and civic-critical thinking under key stage-appropriate thinking and civic competencies, respectively, and also makes a more explicit point about developing creative and critical thinking competencies under the Language and Communication curriculum area.

### **Critical thinking in teacher education programmes preparing mother tongue teachers**

In the Swedish study program (SP) for future teachers of the subject of Swedish in lower and upper secondary school, there is a section titled 'Entrepreneurial approach'. It is stated that the school's mission to promote entrepreneurship, business enterprise and innovation thinking will be taken into account in the education for teacher students in the subject of Swedish. The student will be given the opportunity to reflect on entrepreneurial learning as an educational perspective. This means developing general skills, such as initiative, responsibility, communication and cooperation. The teacher education program is intended said to prepare the students for adopting an entrepreneurial approach in the development of their forthcoming profession as teachers (SP, 2017, p. 6). This way of expressing entrepreneurship and creativity is entirely in line with policy-critical thinking.

Subject teachers in the Swedish school system are expected to demonstrate an in-depth ability to critically and independently utilise, systematise and reflect on their

own and others' experiences as well as relevant research results in order to contribute to the development of professional activities and knowledge within subjects, subject areas and subject didactics (SP, 2017, p. 3). It is worth noting that the research does not seem to have a privileged position in relation to the teacher's own experiences in the education of future teachers in this passage. Moreover, the teacher students should be able to demonstrate the ability to safely and critically use digital tools in the educational activities, thereby taking into account the role of different media and digital environments in teaching in school.

Teacher education for lower and upper secondary school aims at educating future teachers to adopt a scientific approach. The education is supposed to give the student high theoretical competence, anchored in research and proven experience. It is assumed that a scientific approach is continuously developed through the studies' close links to didactic science and the conscious development of the student's critical approach, analytical capability and ability to communicate his or her knowledge orally and in writing. Through practical and theoretical knowledge and skills as well as the ability to make use of research results, students are expected to be prepared to contribute to the development of their profession (SP, 2017, p. 2). In this passage, critical thinking is linked to a more general research approach of critical examination.

According to the course syllabus (CS), teacher students who will teach the subject of Swedish must be able to demonstrate their abilities of literary interpretation and critical thinking verbally and in writing in the course titled 'Literature in Society'. They should also have the ability to critically review the school's syllabi and reflect on how they are realised in school practice. In the course syllabus for future teachers in the subject of Swedish, there are no real indications that the subject of Swedish could be considered as a society-critical, personality-developing or creative subject. In this regard, the course plan only states that the course will elucidate the Swedish teachers' mission in a postmodern, media-expansive and multicultural society (CS, 2015), and there are no further indications regarding what this means when it comes to teaching content and teaching approaches.

In the latest reshuffle of Kosovo's teacher education programmes, lower secondary subject teachers are required to have a bachelor of arts (BA) degree from a respective academic department—for example, Albanian mother tongue teachers are required to get their BA degrees at Albanian Language Department at the Faculty of Philology, University of Prishtina—and a masters of arts (MA) degree from the Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina. Hence, the following section examines mother tongue teacher education programmes and curricula at the BA level at the Faculty of Philology, University of Prishtina and MA teacher education programmes at the Faculty of Education, University of Prishtina. Unfortunately, the study plan for the BA degree in the Albanian language only contains information about the specific courses over the four-year programme and lacks any elaboration on the goals and objectives of the programme as a whole. The titles of the courses as well as individual brief course outlines in the study plan indicate that almost all of them focus on disciplinary knowledge related to Albanian language and grammar (Department of Albanian Language, n.d.).

The Catalogue of Programmes of the Faculty of Education at the University of Prishtina is richer in information about the contents of specific programmes, which

mainly include primary teacher education, and masters of education for specific subjects, including a one-year professional MA programme in Teaching Albanian Language and Literature (Faculty of Education, 2017). The overall goal of the MA programme is to advance modern teaching and pedagogical practice competencies in addition to academic competencies obtained in previous BA programmes. Since students' prior focus was on academic development, the professional MA in mother tongue teaching is more narrowly focussed on courses such as effective teaching, classroom management and student assessment. Critical thinking is not explicitly addressed in the goals and expected outcomes for students who will complete the MA programme, however implicitly the key competencies set out in the KCF seem to be embedded within the MA programme. As a result, it may be assumed that since the MA programme is in line with the latest KCF requirements, student teachers will be exposed to critical thinking competence. For example, one of the outcomes for students is to be able to unpack the curriculum requirements and learning outcomes into meaningful topics and learning activities for school pupils, and another highlights the development of advanced reading and communication skills in order to stimulate pupils' creativity. The brief course descriptions for each of the courses in the MA programme also do not make direct references to critical thinking, but the underlying principle seems to be that the programme contributes to preparing mother tongue teachers to teach the new competency-based curriculum.

### **Critical thinking in the syllabus of the subject of mother tongue in Sweden and Kosovo**

Teaching the subject of Swedish aims at providing students with the opportunity to develop their understanding of the language for thinking, communicating and learning. Through teaching, students will be given the opportunity to develop knowledge about how to formulate their own opinions and thoughts in different types of texts and through different media (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 252). The purpose of learning to formulate one's opinion is linguistic rather than critical. It is about adapting one's language and formulations to different contexts rather than grounding individual opinions on careful inquires. The 'critical' in the subject of Swedish is instead associated with students developing knowledge about how to search for information from different sources and critically assess the information found.

Different strategies for reading and writing different kinds of texts constitute a central theme in the syllabus for the subject of Swedish. The fiction that the students read within the course should represent different genres, geographical origins as well as some well-known works. The teacher should choose fiction that highlights the human conditions and questions related to identity and life (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 257). The question of 'why', however, seems to be subordinate; that is, it is less clear why these aspects are considered important and how teachers and students are expected to deal with them.

To obtain the passing grade in Swedish in Grade 9, the student should be able to construct simple reasoning about the salient messages in different texts and how a text has been influenced by the historical and cultural context in which it was created.

Furthermore, the student should be able to search, select and compile information from a limited selection of sources and provide simple reasoning about the credibility and relevance of the information and sources. The students can discuss various topics by asking questions and giving opinions with simple arguments in a way that, to some extent, brings the conversation and discussion forward (Lgr 11, 2011, p. 261). In the syllabus for Swedish in Grade 9, the critical element is above all linked to a critical approach to digital information sources. On the whole, the subject of Swedish appears as a subject related to linguistic–instrumental skills, without any visible elements of creativity, personal development or critical reading of various human conditions.

In the Kosovo curriculum, for the majority population in the country, the mother tongue is Albanian. The mother tongue curricula of other local language groups, such as Serbian, Turkish and Bosnian, are not reviewed here (see Horvatek & Tahirsylaj, 2017, regarding the diversity of the minority education model in Kosovo). According to the Guide for New Curriculum Implementation 2016–2021 (MEST, n.d.), the new competency-based curricula was first implemented nationwide in 2017 only in Grades 0, 1, 6 and 10—corresponding to the first grades for primary (0, 1), lower secondary (6) and upper secondary (10) education, respectively. Furthermore, the Guide stipulates that subject syllabi were and would be developed progressively, starting with Grades 0, 1, 6 and 10 in 2016, Grades 2, 7 and 11 in 2017 and so on until the subject syllabi are completed in 2019 for Grades 4, 5 and 9. This means that the grade syllabus for the subject of Albanian language that is currently in place and available for us to review is based on the previous content-based curriculum framework and does not reflect the latest competency-based curriculum reform. Therefore, we will review the old but still applicable Grade 9 syllabus as well as the Grade 7 syllabus, which is available and was developed in line with the latest curriculum reform requirements, as an expected version of the Grade 9 Albanian language syllabus has yet to be developed.

The applicable Grade 9 Albanian language syllabus entails the following objectives: to reinforce, develop and demonstrate communication skills; to advance the level of analysis, appreciation and critique for literary and non-literary texts; and to acquire and demonstrate appropriate language system knowledge (MEST, 2003). The syllabus focuses on listening and speaking, reading and writing skills in the mother tongue, and the frequent use of specific verbs such as ‘understand’, ‘master’, ‘analyse’ and ‘evaluate’ implies that the syllabus is primarily based on a content-based curriculum framework and learning objectives defined according to Bloom’s Taxonomy of knowledge. The new Grade 7 syllabi, on the other hand, have been developed in full compliance with the new KCF requirements. The new Grade 7 Teaching Plan and Programme notes the following:

For each subject, the MEST develops teaching programmes (syllabi) which reflect KCF and Core Curriculum requirements as well as KCF principles and aims, key stage competencies, learning outcomes for each key stage, cross-curricula issues, teaching and learning methodology, and student assessment. (MEST, 2017, p. 3)

Since mother tongue is associated with communication and expression competencies in the KCF, critical thinking is not explicitly addressed in the Albanian language syllabus. Instead, references are made to the enrichment of vocabulary in the mother tongue, writing stories, explanations and arguments and developing imagination and

creativity. The rest of the syllabus defines topics to be covered and associated learning outcomes per topic. By extension, it can be expected that the new Grade 9 syllabus in the Albanian language as a mother tongue will also incorporate critical and creative thinking to some extent, and it will primarily be focussed on communication and expression competencies.

## Discussion and conclusions

The analyses of the national education curriculum contexts in Sweden and Kosovo show the influence that transnational and national education policy contexts have on the opportunities for students to master competences more broadly, and critical thinking more specifically. First, it is observed that the conceptions of knowledge have been evolving and shifting within both countries when examining the recent curriculum reform respectively. In the case of Kosovo, the shift was from *disciplinary knowledge* in the past to *practical and experiential knowledge*, and by extension, from *academic rationalism* towards *humanism* and *social efficiency*. In the case of Sweden, the shift has been towards practical knowledge directed toward the needs of the labour market and social efficiency *within* a framework of academic rationalism. Furthermore, the shift took place in different ways: in Sweden, the shift happened more organically and through a public investigation (Official Report, 1992, p. 94) of the concept of knowledge; in Kosovo, the shift was mostly externally driven through international technical expertise in the curriculum reform. In this regard, and to address our first research question, 'To what extent do trans-national policies affect national education and curriculum policies?', a different pattern is observed in the two countries. For example, Sweden, although it is an EU member state, has resisted the incorporation of the term 'competence' or 'competency' in its curriculum documents, considering the concept of competence to be already very close to the concept of knowledge outlined in the Swedish curriculum. Thus, it has continued to use the term 'abilities' instead. However, Sweden adapted to the transnational trend of focussing on standards-based learning outcomes in its most recent curriculum reform, Lgr 11, as a result of pressure from the EU governance of education policy during the 2000s (Wahlström, 2016; Wahlström & Sundberg, 2018). Paradoxically, the latest competency-based curriculum reform in Kosovo—a non-EU state—is much more in line with the EU and EC curriculum guidelines than that in Sweden. Still, the alignment of Kosovo's curriculum with the EC key competences is somewhat externally influenced, as the competency-based curriculum framework of 2011 was supported by the technical expertise of international donors and stakeholders, such as UNICEF, UNESCO IBE and the EU. Subsequently, while both Swedish and Kosovar national education and curriculum policies have been affected by transnational policies, the impact has been more extensive in Kosovo than in Sweden. In turn, this influence may be a reflection of curriculum development expertise in the two countries, with Sweden having a much longer and more developed curriculum-making tradition, whereas Kosovo is still in the early phase of developing curriculum expertise.

The varying findings and patterns in recent curriculum policy reform in Sweden and Kosovo underline how differently the global education policy trends have



affected the two contexts. In Sweden, an adaptation process has occurred locally despite strong borrowing and influences from the EU and EC, which is consistent with the literature highlighting the culture theorists' perspective that local contexts shape the policies implemented in a given country (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). Therefore, Sweden emerges as a *divergent case* of transnational policy flow. In contrast, in Kosovo, the curriculum reform followed the global education policy trends closely, and thus Kosovo emerges here as a *convergent case*, showing strong curriculum convergence with the recommendations of the EC curriculum policy. Furthermore, as a developing country, Kosovo follows an already established policy borrowing trajectory, with education policies usually flowing from a Western context (the European Commission and other Western-based organisations, such as the OECD and the World Bank in this case) to a developing country (here, Kosovo) (Tahirsylaj, 2018; Verger et al., 2012).

Next, regarding our second research question, 'How do different curriculum theoretical underpinnings affect the potential to realise the transnational policy concept of "critical thinking"?', and through an exploration of opportunities to develop critical thinking in curriculum documents, mother tongue teacher education programmes and mother tongue syllabi, we find an even more nuanced story. Critical thinking as a policy designates a procedural knowledge linked to generic context-independent competencies, which can be applied to a wide range of work and life contexts, with certain dispositions of being 'open-minded' and able to identify, clarify and analyse a particular problem. This form of competence can most often be related to social efficiency and the Aristotelian concept of *techne* as a narrow conception of practical knowledge (Deng & Luke 2008). This version of critical thinking, in combination with academic rationalism, dominates the Swedish curriculum 2011 (see Wahlström, 2014). A civic-critical thinking—that is, taking deliberations on common problems seriously in terms of social reconstructionism and the conceptualisation of *phronesis*—is largely absent in the most recent course plans in the Swedish curriculum Lgr 11. Despite the curriculum reform in 2011, it still draws on a 1992 socio-cultural perspective, which theoretically underpins the knowledge concept in the Swedish curriculum.

While in Sweden critical thinking competence (or ability) seems to be much more implicit than explicit in the national curriculum documents—as well as in teacher education programmes and Swedish language syllabi—in Kosovo, the national curriculum makes explicit references to *thinking competences*, which pertain to policy-critical thinking, and *civic competencies* pertaining to civic-critical thinking. Additionally, the entire new curriculum framework is centred on six key competencies that students need to master as they move through their pre-university education from primary to upper secondary education. With regard to teacher education programmes, the findings from Kosovo show that the BA degree for mother tongue teachers still requires strong disciplinary knowledge of the academic discipline in terms of academic rationalism, while the MA degree has been updated to reflect the latest curriculum reform requirements underpinned by the logic of social efficiency. With regard to the Grade 9 mother tongue syllabus in Kosovo, the analysis found that the older content-based syllabus is still in place since curriculum implementation started with Grade 6 in lower

secondary education and will progress to Grade 9 later in 2019/2020. However, the new Grade 7 mother tongue syllabus is fully in compliance with the new competency-based curriculum policy. In sum, students in both Sweden and Kosovo could potentially have opportunities to develop twenty-first century skills broadly and critical thinking in particular—although not explicitly and not only through the mother tongue curricula.

One surprising and striking finding concerns the complete absence of Didaktik tradition principles in the curriculum reform and development in the two countries. In both cases, the curriculum content and outcomes are defined top-down, with little leeway for teachers for interpretation and application of Didaktik analysis. One plausible explanation for the decreasing influence of Didaktik tradition in curriculum development in the two countries might be related to the decreasing role of Didaktik in transnational policy trends. In other words, since Didaktik has been marginalised by transnational policies and major international players such as the OECD—which primarily borrow and build from a social efficiency perspective within curriculum tradition—it has lost its voice and influence within national education contexts as well.

## Notes

1. The EC has recently updated the Reference Framework, revising the labelling of the competences while keeping the same number of them, including (1) Literacy competence; (2) Multilingual competence; (3) Mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering; (4) Digital competence; (5) Personal, social and learning to learn competence; (6) Citizenship competence; (7) Entrepreneurship competence and (8) Cultural awareness and expression competence. (OJEU, 2018, pp. 7–8). Since the documents of the two national contexts analysed here were developed before 2018, the EC 2006 Reference Framework was more relevant for the present article.
2. In the English version of the Swedish curriculum for compulsory school, *Curriculum for the compulsory school, preschool class and school-age educare* (NAE, 2018), the term ‘ability’ is used throughout the text. The term ‘ability’ is not defined in the curriculum text. However, in the preparatory work the NAE defines ‘ability’ as follows: ‘In the curriculum, knowledge is described in terms of a know-how, an ability, to participate in certain specific ways in different contexts’ (Report U2009/312/S, p. 14; *our translation*).
3. Also, see Biesta (2008) as an example of analysis of civic education curricula in Scotland.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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**Armend Tahirsylaj's** research interests span across a number of research domains, primarily pertaining to curriculum theory, Didaktik, education policy, teacher education, international large-scale assessments and international comparative education.

**Ninni Wahlström's** area of research interest is curriculum theory, educational policy and pedagogy (didactics). Against a backdrop of globalisation in for example economical, communicative and everyday domains, she is interested in transnational policy discourses and comparative studies.

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