



Whose voices are heard in Music Curriculum Development? A comparative study of Germany, Ireland and Lithuania

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Abstract

This article explores whose voices shape music curriculum development in Germany, Ireland, and Lithuania. Drawing on document analysis and comparative policy review, it investigates whose voices are recognised, consulted, or silenced in national music curriculum-making. Curriculum development in each country is examined through three interconnected lenses: historical development, the processes of music curriculum design, and the structures of decision-making, while also considering how stakeholder voices are represented or marginalised within these frameworks. Findings show that all three systems rely on expert-led curriculum design framed by competency-based outcomes, yet differ in how they structure participation. Ireland employs the most open consultative model, Germany reflects fragmented federal governance, and Lithuania maintains strong central coordination. The study highlights persistent gaps between policy rhetoric and meaningful stakeholder influence in music curriculum development.

Keywords: music curriculum development; stakeholder voice; curriculum governance; comparative music education

Resumo

Este artigo explora quais são as vozes que influenciam o desenvolvimento dos currículos de música na Alemanha, na Irlanda e na Lituânia. Com base na análise documental e na revisão comparativa de políticas, investiga quais vozes são reconhecidas, consultadas ou silenciadas na elaboração dos currículos nacionais de música. O desenvolvimento curricular em cada país é examinado através de três perspectivas interligadas: a evolução histórica, os processos de concepção dos currículos de

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música e as estruturas de tomada de decisão, considerando, simultaneamente, a forma como as vozes das partes interessadas são representadas ou marginalizadas no âmbito destes quadros. Os resultados mostram que os três sistemas se baseiam numa conceção curricular liderada por especialistas e enquadrada em resultados orientados por competências, mas diferem na forma como estruturam a participação. A Irlanda emprega o modelo consultivo mais aberto, a Alemanha reflete uma governação federal fragmentada e a Lituânia mantém uma forte coordenação central. O estudo destaca lacunas persistentes entre a retórica política e a influência significativa das partes interessadas no desenvolvimento do currículo de música.

Palavras-chave: desenvolvimento do currículo de música; voz das partes interessadas; governação curricular; educação musical comparativa

1. Introduction

In contemporary educational discourse, definitions of “curriculum” have expanded to embrace the totality of educational experience and the interaction of a broad range of stakeholders, including government officials, curriculum theorists, teachers, students and the wider society (e.g., Ahlstrom, 2003; Kelly, 2009; Connelly, 2013; Priestley et al., 2021). In parallel, the term *curriculum making* has gained traction, signalling a shift from viewing curriculum as a body of knowledge to be ‘delivered’ towards recognising it as a complex social process, continuously shaped and reshaped by multiple actors across policy, institutional, and classroom levels. This perspective foregrounds issues of agency, participation, and power. Priestley et al. (2021) describe curriculum making as involving “highly dynamic processes of interpretation, mediation, negotiation and translation, across multiple layers or sites of education systems” (p. 1). These sites of curriculum activity include the “macro” level, often associated with the publication of official national and/or regional curriculum frameworks, and the “micro” and “nano” levels where teachers and students engage in planning and enacting the curriculum in the classroom (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009; Priestley et al., 2021).

The present study focuses on curriculum activity at the macro level, specifically the development of official curriculum texts, often referred to as “curriculum-as-plan” (Aoki 2004/1991; Stavrou & O’Connell, 2022), or the “reified” curriculum (Cooke & Spruce, 2016). To signal this analytical focus on the formal production of curriculum documents, the term *curriculum development* is used, rather than *curriculum making*.

2. Theoretical framework: Curriculum development as a social practice

Although this article centres on the production of official curriculum documents, our conceptual point of departure is the understanding of curriculum as a form of social practice (Priestley et al., 2013; Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Priestley et al., 2021). From this perspective, an official curriculum is not a neutral artefact; it is a cultural and political text that reflects what a society values as knowledge and experience (Goodlad, 1979; Pinar, 2012). It not only defines what is to be learned

but also shapes how learning is imagined and legitimised within educational systems.

In this sense, the curriculum sets the framework and the *tone* for what may sound in the classroom. This metaphor acquires particular resonance in music education: the curriculum determines which musical practices, creative expressions, and cultural narratives are heard and valued, which remain in the background, and which are silenced. Curriculum development, therefore, is not merely a technical process of designing documents, but a social and political act that embodies cultural values and questions of identity (Stauffer, 2010; Anderson, 2024), institutional structures, and power relations.

Historically, curriculum development has been considered from a top-down or “centre-periphery” model (OECD 2019; Kelly 2009), typically led by a developer in consultation with experts (Mulpeter et al., 2023). Although teachers, academics and professional organisations are increasingly involved in macro-level curriculum development, their influence on curriculum design may vary significantly (Finnanger & Prøitz, 2024; Lau, 2001). Despite this research, empirical knowledge about how curriculum development unfolds in practice remains limited. This gap is particularly visible in music education, where the mechanisms that shape the inclusion, mediation, or exclusion of voices have seldom been explored in practice-based research.

Against this backdrop, this study asks:

Whose voices are heard in music curriculum development, and how are these voices institutionalised, mediated, or marginalised?

Drawing on the work of Deprès and Dubé (2020) and Mitra (2008), “voice” can be defined as the process by which stakeholders are listened to, included in, or take charge of the decision-making process. Similarly, Rudd, Colligan, and Naik (2006), conceptualise (learner) “voice” as operating across a graduated continuum of participation encompassing five levels, ranging from; being informed about decisions made; being consulted, where views are sought but have limited influence; being involved through having direct input into proposals; collaboration through co-constructing decisions; to forms of participation in which learners are empowered to exercise increasing influence over decision-making processes. Such processes enhance stakeholders’ agency.

To address the research question above, we present a comparative analysis of the curriculum development processes at the macro level in Germany, Ireland, and Lithuania. The analysis examines official documents, development procedures, and governance structures to identify whose voices are sought, heeded, and heard, how

participation in curriculum development is organised, and how different voices are positioned within national music curriculum reforms.

3. Methodology

Building on this theoretical understanding of curriculum as social practice, the study employs a documentary and comparative approach to explore how these dynamics manifest in three national contexts, combining qualitative document analysis (Kutsyuruba, 2023) with the principles of comparative education research (Ragin, 2008; Milošević & Maksimović, 2020). The study focuses on three European countries Germany, Ireland, and Lithuania, which were selected for both conceptual and practical reasons. Germany's federal structure, Ireland's centrally coordinated but consultative framework, and Lithuania's unitary national system each reflect distinct governance traditions that shape curriculum development. These contrasting models offer an opportunity to observe how different political and administrative arrangements influence whose voices become visible or remain marginal in curriculum-making. In addition, the three countries represent different historical trajectories and paces of reform within European education, allowing for a comparison between long-established curriculum traditions (Ireland) and more recently restructured systems (Germany, Lithuania). This distinction makes it possible to compare how historically embedded curriculum traditions interact with newer reform agendas shaped by different political, cultural, and temporal contexts within European education systems. From a practical perspective, these cases were selected because of the availability of policy documents in accessible languages and the researchers' in-depth contextual knowledge of each system, enabling a more nuanced and situated analysis rather than a purely formal comparison.

Each researcher involved in this study represents one distinct national system and brings specialist knowledge in the area of curriculum and curriculum development. Drawing on our diverse professional backgrounds and situated expertise, we were able to provide insider perspectives on the specific policy contexts and stakeholder networks within our respective countries. The first author sought to present the case solely on the basis of official documents and publicly available sources. The respective author is acquainted with members of the curriculum development group and discussed the analyses with the former head of the group. These exchanges served to validate the analyses and to verify the accuracy and plausibility of the interpretations.

The second author was actively involved in national curriculum development processes. Over a three-year period, she was a member of the national curriculum development group and coordinated the preparation of subject curricula across all disciplines. This role provided in-depth insight into how curricula are designed, negotiated, and approved at the national level. In addition, she participated in the

advisory group for the music curriculum, where key structural decisions were discussed, proposals were formulated, and subsequent revisions were made. This dual involvement enabled a comprehensive understanding of both general curriculum governance and subject-specific decision-making processes. While not directly involved in macro-level curriculum development, the third author contributes a practice-informed and research-informed perspective. As an experienced classroom teacher working with official music syllabi, she has been involved in curriculum-making at the meso (institutional/school) and micro (classroom) levels (Thijs & van den Akker, 2009), and in curriculum development within higher education. Her doctoral research played an important role in the early stages of lower secondary school music curriculum reform (NCCA, 2016).

Additionally, all three national cases were discussed individually with colleagues familiar with each system, in order to verify the accuracy of the information and the reliability of its interpretation. This combination of analytical diversity and situated expertise ensured a more grounded and context-sensitive comparative analysis.

The methodological process involved three main stages. First, a systematic collection and review of official documents was undertaken, including national education acts, curriculum frameworks, ministry guidelines, and official reports published between approximately 1990 and 2025, depending on the country context. Supplementary sources included relevant academic publications and information from government and institutional websites.

In the Lithuanian case, the curriculum development process was regulated through orders of the Minister of Education, Science and Sport, which set the timetable for curriculum renewal and established curriculum development groups and advisory councils. In addition, procedural and methodological documents specify who participates in the process, how decisions are made, and how consultation and coordination are organised.

In Ireland, curriculum development is the responsibility of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), who advises the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment. The curriculum development process involves background research to inform the curriculum, the publication of a 'background paper' and a range of consultation reports, all of which were analysed for the purpose of this study.

In Germany, curriculum development is the responsibility of the individual federal states, reflecting the country's federal system of educational governance. This study, therefore, focuses on the joint music curriculum reform in Berlin and Brandenburg as an illustrative case. The scope of literature for Germany consists

primarily of official policy documents and so-called “grey literature”, including the *Rahmenlehrplan Musik*, the subject-specific guidance document (*Fachbrief Musik*), and accompanying explanatory and contextual texts published by the respective state education authorities. These publications document both the conceptual foundations of the curriculum and the expert-led development and consultation processes coordinated by the state institute responsible at the time. All of these documents were analysed for the purposes of this study.

Second, the documents were analysed using a qualitative coding framework, drawing on principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012), to identify key analytical dimensions related to curriculum development:

1. *Historical Development and Reforms of the National Curriculum.* The analysis considered how historical, political, and educational reforms have influenced the design, structure, and evolution of the national curriculum in each country.
2. *The curriculum development process.* Particular attention was given to the development process of recent music curriculum, focusing on the roles and interactions of actors such as teachers, researchers, associations, and communities, and the degree of their participation.
3. *The invisible hand of education: Who decides?* This dimension examined the formal and informal decision-making structures that determine authority in curriculum development and how institutional governance influences these processes.
4. *Whose voices are unheard?* The final category identified stakeholders and perspectives that remain underrepresented or excluded from curriculum-making, assessing the implications for inclusivity and representation in music education.

Finally, findings from each national case were systematically compared across these dimensions to identify similarities, divergences, and contextual specificities. This comparative approach enabled a deeper understanding of whose voices are represented in curriculum-making processes and how power, expertise, and participation are distributed among educational stakeholders in the respective three countries.

Before turning to these country cases, certain methodological limitations of the study should be acknowledged. This comparative study was guided by four analytical dimensions: historical development, the process of curriculum design, decision-making structures, and the representation of voices in music curriculum development. While these categories provided a coherent framework for cross-country analysis, they inevitably entail a selective focus. These dimensions make it

possible to observe both similarities and differences across the three contexts and to generate meaningful insights, yet they do not aim to provide an exhaustive account of curriculum development or to encompass all possible analytical perspectives.

The three countries Germany, Ireland, and Lithuania represent distinct governance and cultural contexts, which limits the degree of comparability. In particular, Germany's federal education system, with sixteen independent state ministries responsible for curriculum design, poses challenges for drawing general conclusions. Lithuania presents a different situation: although the procedures for curriculum development are clearly defined in official documents, there is a notable absence of empirical research that could inform our understanding of how these processes actually unfold in practice and help address the questions raised in this study. These limitations, on the one hand, posed methodological challenges for us as researchers. On the other hand, they offered the opportunity to illuminate underexplored aspects of curriculum-making and to highlight differences and convergences across diverse systems. In the following section, we present the three country cases.

4. Country Cases

4.1 Lithuania

Historical Development and Reforms of the National Curriculum

Following the restoration of independence in 1990, Lithuania undertook a fundamental transformation of its education system, moving away from the Soviet model towards a democratic, learner-centred approach. The first General Curriculum Framework (GCF) was approved in 1994, introducing national standards for general education and setting out principles of comprehensive and compulsory schooling (Eurydice, 2024). This reform established the foundation for national curriculum planning as a unified, state-led process. A significant curriculum revision took place in 2003, aligning Lithuanian education with European standards and emphasising competences, integration of subjects, and flexibility in content delivery (Želvys, 2004). The 2009 reform further reinforced a competence-based approach, introducing cross-curricular areas such as creativity, cultural awareness, and civic education. The most recent reform, implemented in 2023, updated all subject curricula including music to align with the new Lithuanian Progress Strategy 2030, prioritising key competences for lifelong learning, digital literacy, and inclusion (National Agency for Education, 2023). Throughout these reforms, the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport has maintained full authority over curriculum development, while expert groups and public consultations have played an advisory role. The evolution of the Lithuanian curriculum thus reflects a gradual shift from centralised prescription towards outcome-based flexibility, yet within a strongly state-coordinated system.

The curriculum development process

The most recent reform of the Lithuanian music curriculum took place within the broader renewal of the national general education curriculum, coordinated by the National Agency for Education under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The process followed a uniform national procedure for all subjects from 2020 until 2023. The music curriculum was developed through a structured and logical process, with clear stages and timelines. Detailed descriptions of general competences were produced at national level to ensure coherence across all areas of learning. After that the National Agency for Education issued an open invitation to develop new subject curricula, appointing one academic expert (PhD) and one practitioner for each discipline. In the case of music, this pair of developers collaborated with representatives from the national community of music educators, who engaged in professional discussions and feedback rounds to refine the proposed framework. Subsequently, the competence groups submitted their formal proposals to the authors, where these drafts were reviewed and consolidated into a final version. Once revisions were completed, the curriculum was submitted for official approval.

The Invisible Hand of Education: Who decides?

Official documents indicate that curriculum development in Lithuania involves curriculum experts, subject specialists, researchers, and teacher representatives. While this structure appears comprehensive, in practice these groups tend to operate independently, with limited collaboration and unclear divisions of responsibility. The process lacks a clearly defined mechanism for dialogue between academic, professional, and administrative actors, and differing approaches to music education often result in conceptual inconsistencies. Ultimately, the development of the music curriculum depends on a small group of experts, or in some cases a single author, who assumes primary responsibility for drafting the final document. Although this model ensures efficiency and alignment with ministerial policy, it leaves little room for shared authorship or collective decision-making.

Whose voices are unheard?

In Lithuania, curriculum development formally provides opportunities for consultation, yet participation tends to be fragmented and uneven. Teachers and researchers may comment on draft versions, but once curricula are finalised, there is little scope for substantial revision. Students and parents are typically not represented in these processes. Decision-making authority remains concentrated within the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport and the National Agency for Education, meaning that practitioners' contributions are often advisory rather than co-decisive. Consequently, the perspectives of teachers, students, and the wider

cultural community tend to be underrepresented, while expert and administrative voices dominate the process. Although recent reforms signal a growing awareness of inclusion and competence-based education, the participatory structures necessary to realise these principles remain underdeveloped. Curriculum-making in Lithuania therefore tends to reproduce a centralised model in which some educational voices particularly those of students and practitioners risk remaining unheard.

4.2 Ireland

Historical Development and Reforms of the National Curriculum

When Ireland gained independence in 1922, education - particularly at the primary level - was closely aligned with the promotion of national identity, with a strong emphasis on reviving the Irish language and culture. The early curriculum prioritised the so-called *Three Rs* (reading, writing, arithmetic) alongside moral and religious instruction, reflecting both the nationalist agenda and the influence of the Catholic Church on education (Coolahan, 1981). The first major curriculum reform came in 1971 with the introduction of *An Curaclam Nua* (The New Curriculum), which marked a shift towards child-centred and progressive education. The 1971 framework emphasised active learning, creativity, and the holistic development of the child, influenced by international pedagogical trends of the time (Department of Education, 1971). Further updates in 1999 built on these principles, reinforcing learner-centred approaches and expanding the integration of the arts, including music, across the primary curriculum.

At the secondary level, free education was introduced in 1967. Typically, secondary education has been subject-centred with high-stakes state examinations determining curriculum development. A reform of the lower secondary curriculum in 1989 was underpinned by a commitment to equitable access and comprehensive schooling, and “education for all”. From 2011 onwards, curriculum policy entered a new phase with the development of *Curriculum Frameworks* - a shift towards outcomes-based education that redefined learning in terms of competencies and learning statements.

The curriculum development process

The development of the most recent Junior Cycle Music (lower secondary school) specification followed the structured procedures established by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the statutory body responsible for curriculum reform in Ireland. The process began with the creation of a broader *Curriculum Framework*, which defines the overarching educational philosophy, statements of learning, and key competences to be achieved across all subjects (NCCA, 2015). Within this framework, *Subject Development Groups* (SDGs) were appointed to design subject-specific *Specifications*, ensuring that each discipline

reflected the wider policy aims of the national curriculum. Curriculum design proceeded through three interrelated phases: curriculum shaping, curriculum development, and curriculum approval. The *curriculum shaping* stage involved research, deliberation, networking, and consultation - principles that underpin all NCCA activity. A *Background Paper and Brief for the Development of Junior Cycle Music* was subsequently produced to guide the process and to invite feedback from educational partners and the wider public (NCCA, 2016). Based on this input, the *Draft Subject Specification* was prepared and published for public consultation, after which revisions were made in light of feedback received. Once the revised document was finalised, the *Junior Cycle Music Specification* was submitted to the Minister for Education for formal approval and implementation. It was drafted between 2016-2017 and implemented from 2018 on and remains the current curriculum (NCCA, 2017b). An Early Enactment Review has taken place which will inform future revisions (NCCA, 2024a). This process reflects the NCCA's commitment to research-informed and transparent curriculum development, balancing national policy coherence with opportunities for stakeholder input.

The invisible Hand of Education: Who decides?

Each Subject Development Group consists of approximately fifteen key stakeholders who meet regularly throughout the development process. For Junior Cycle Music, this group included curriculum experts and researchers from higher education institutes, teachers, school management, and music industry representatives. Guided by NCCA policy, their work is informed by research, relevant policy frameworks, and national consultation reports (NCCA, 2024a). While students are not formal members of these groups, the NCCA has, over the past fifteen years, made significant efforts to integrate student and teacher perspectives at various stages of curriculum design. Notably, insights from longitudinal research carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) informed the *Background Paper for Music* at lower secondary level (Smyth et al., 2006, 2007; NCCA, 2016). In 2014, the NCCA commissioned a longitudinal study to explore how student perspectives could be systematically included within educational discourse (Flynn, 2017). During the development of the *Junior Cycle Music Specification*, the Music Development Group met with ten students, each of whom identified key priorities for the subject. Their feedback directly informed the structure and content of the composition portfolio, a class-based assessment component introduced in the revised curriculum. Student voices continue to play a role in ongoing curriculum review and redevelopment, reflecting the NCCA's long-term commitment to inclusive, evidence-based, and participatory curriculum design (NCCA, 2024a).

Whose voices are unheard?

There is little doubt that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has actively fostered consultation and networking with a wide range of stakeholders. Consultation takes multiple forms, including online surveys, focus group meetings, seminars, and webinars, and draft documents are made publicly accessible for feedback (NCCA, 2024b). This reflects a clear institutional commitment to inclusivity and transparency within curriculum development. Nevertheless, important questions remain. While public consultation on draft documents is widely and easily accessible, the level of response to the *Junior Cycle Specification for Music* was relatively low, the majority of whom were secondary teachers (81%). Responses were also received from higher education lecturers/researcher, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and six music and music education organisation (NCCA, 2017a). It would appear that the voices of secondary students or parents are not represented at this stage of the process. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether all stakeholders possess the necessary knowledge and expertise to engage meaningfully in curriculum design at the national level. Previous research has suggested that even when consultation is open, participation may be uneven and concentrated among those already professionally embedded within the system (Mulpeter et al., 2023). In addition, the extent to which feedback from consultation is incorporated into the final specifications remains ambiguous. Considerable progress has undoubtedly been made in developing structured mechanisms for participation, but further work is needed to ensure that consultation moves beyond formal engagement towards genuine influence and shared decision-making.

4.3 Germany

Given Germany's federal structure, the analysis focuses on the joint curriculum reform in Berlin and Brandenburg as an illustrative case. While not representative of all *Bundesländer* (*federal states*), this case provides insight into how expert-led curriculum development and consultation are organised within a federal governance framework.

Historical Development and Reforms of the National Curriculum

Germany presents a distinct case due to its *föderales Bildungssystem* (federal educational system), where each of the sixteen *Bundesländer* (federal states) holds full authority over school curricula. This federal autonomy results not only in sixteen separate curriculum frameworks but, in some states, curricula are differentiated even further according to school type (*Gymnasium*, *Sekundarschule*, *Gesamtschule*, etc.). The decentralised organisation of education is historically rooted in the constitutional principle of *Kulturhoheit der Länder* (cultural sovereignty of the federal states), which grants the *Länder* exclusive legislative and administrative responsibility for education, culture, and media. This principle

emerged after 1945 as a deliberate response to the dangers of centralised control under totalitarian regimes, ensuring that educational authority would remain regionally distributed and democratically accountable. Each *Land* (state), therefore, maintains its own *Ministerium für Bildung* (Ministry of Education), curriculum laws, and school structures, reflecting historical, political, and cultural diversity. At the same time, cross-state coordination is ensured through the *Ständige Konferenz der Kultusminister der Länder in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs – *Kultusministerkonferenz* or KMK). The KMK serves as the national forum where the sixteen ministries negotiate shared educational standards and mutual recognition agreements, particularly concerning the *Abitur* examination and teacher qualifications.

The curriculum development process

The most recent reform of the *Rahmenlehrplan Musik* (music curriculum framework) took place in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg, which operate under a joint curriculum framework for all subjects. The process was coordinated by the former *Landesinstitut für Schule und Medien Berlin-Brandenburg* (State Institute for Schools and Media – LISUM). The development committee included *Fachlehrkräfte* (subject teachers) from primary and secondary schools, *Fachdidaktikerinnen** (didactics experts), and academics specialising in music education. The participation was limited to a small number of appointed experts: Aaron Grahovac, Martina Grohmann, Christina Haase, Tobias Hömberg (lead), Oliver Krämer, Lukas Macher, Frank Müller-Brys and Regine Schultz-Zehden (Hömberg & Krämer, 2018, p. 47). Before publication, a broad consultation process was conducted: the draft was made publicly available online, and more than 3,900 responses were collected across all subjects, including 151 specific to music (*Fachbrief Musik Nr. 11*, 2016). Feedback from teachers and the *Bundesverband Musikunterricht* (Federal Association for Music Education – BMU) informed adjustments, particularly regarding *Kompetenzstufen* (competence levels), inclusive language, and the representation of musical diversity. Since 2023, the former LISUM has been replaced by two separate institutions: the *Landesinstitut Brandenburg für Schule und Lehrkräftebildung* (LIBRA) (State Institute for School and Teacher Education Brandenburg, author's translation) and the *Berliner Landesinstitut für Qualifizierung und Qualitätsentwicklung in Schulen* (BLIQ) (Berlin State Institute for Qualification and Quality Development in Schools). It remains unclear whether they will collaborate again on a joint curriculum or not. Nevertheless, despite the participatory character of the online consultation, the process remained expert-driven. Decision-making authority was largely confined to a specialised committee consisting of a small number of subject experts appointed by the respective state institute(s). However, as Germany is a federal state with sixteen independent regions, curriculum development processes may differ considerably from one state to another. The description presented here therefore

represents an exemplary case of the most recent music curriculum reform in Berlin and Brandenburg, rather than a universally applicable model for all German states.

The Invisible Hand of Education: Who Decides?

As shown in sections 1 and 2, curriculum development in Germany is shaped by a complex interaction between federal and state governance. While the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) ensures overall coordination and comparability, decision-making authority ultimately rests with the individual ministries of education in each state. In *Berlin and Brandenburg*, the final version of the *Rahmenlehrplan Musik* was approved by the respective ministries following recommendations from the state institute. The expert committee responsible for drafting the curriculum consisted mainly of academics, experienced music teachers, and representatives from teacher education institutions. Once the consultation phase ended, the ministries determined the final text without further participatory steps. This process illustrates a governance model in which administrative and academic expertise outweigh participatory decision-making. Teachers, schools, and professional associations may offer feedback but hold no formal power. The so-called “invisible hand” of educational governance operates through bureaucratic mechanisms that legitimise curricular decisions while limiting practitioner agency.

Whose voices are unheard?

Although participation and inclusion are prominent concepts in German education policy, there is little empirical evidence of genuine participatory curriculum-making. Existing analyses of educational governance indicate that decision-making processes in the German school system remain highly bureaucratic and expert-driven (Altrichter & Maag Merki, 2015). This tendency is also reflected in music education, where teachers and practitioners are involved primarily as consultants rather than as co-decision makers. Moreover, perspectives from students, parents, and the wider music community are almost entirely absent from curriculum design. Research on classroom practice supports this observation: even within teaching contexts, learners’ musical experiences and voices are often marginalised, and teachers struggle to reconcile students’ everyday musical cultures with curricular expectations (Buchborn & Bons, 2021). These findings suggest a clear gap between policy rhetoric and participatory reality. While official frameworks such as the Berlin–Brandenburg *Rahmenlehrplan Musik* emphasise diversity, inclusion, and learner identity, the actual processes through which curricula are created continue to privilege administrative and academic expertise. In the absence of structural mechanisms for student, or community participation, many relevant voices in German music education remain unheard.

5. Discussion

Across the three countries, curriculum development has been shaped by major historical transitions, yet the nature and drivers of reform differ significantly. Lithuania and Ireland both link curriculum reform to moments of national transformation - Lithuania's shift from the Soviet system to a democratic, competence-based model after 1990, and Ireland's move from a culturally protectionist, church-influenced system toward progressive, child-centred education beginning in the 1970s. In both cases, curriculum change reflects broader political realignments and a gradual opening towards European and international educational trends. Germany, by contrast, presents a long-standing federal tradition in which decentralised curriculum authority is rooted not in recent political change but in the historical principle of cultural sovereignty of the federal states. While all three systems share a common trajectory towards competence-based curricula, they differ in the governance logic that structures reform: a centralised state-led approach in Lithuania, a consultative national framework in Ireland, and a regionally distributed model in Germany.

There are clear similarities in how the music curricula have been developed. In all three countries, the development of the music curriculum is entrusted to appointed expert groups working under ministerial supervision. These committees are responsible for aligning subject-specific aims with the overarching general curriculum framework, which in each case is organised around competency-based learning outcomes. This shared orientation reflects a broader European trend towards outcomes-focused education that seeks to balance artistic creativity with measurable standards. Yet, the ways in which this framework is interpreted and implemented vary substantially. In Germany, for example, Clausen (2024) highlights that the federal structure leads to differing formulations and understandings of *competence* across the *Länder* (states), each reflecting specific pedagogical traditions and curricular priorities. Ireland, while operating within a unified national framework, translates competence orientation into learning outcomes that combine cognitive, creative, and affective dimensions, emphasising teacher and student agency and reflective practice. Lithuania similarly follows an outcomes-based model but applies it within a centralised, state-driven structure that defines competencies at a national level, leaving limited scope for local adaptation.

Although consultation with the wider music education community including teachers, associations, and academic specialists forms part of the process, the scope and impact of such consultation vary considerably. Ireland represents the most extended model, where schools, students, and members of the public are explicitly invited to contribute through structured consultation rounds. In Germany, by contrast, participation appears to have been more selective and largely dependent on voluntary engagement. The consultation link was distributed online by the former LISUM, but it is possible that not all teachers and students yet even

parents were aware that revisions were taking place or that their feedback could be submitted through this channel.

Across all three contexts, curriculum development in music education follows a broadly similar pattern: expert-led design, framed by competency-based objectives and supplemented by consultation procedures that differ in scope and visibility. What distinguishes the three systems is less the intention to involve stakeholders than the structures through which participation is organised. Ireland's consultative approach reflects a deliberate effort to democratise curriculum-making; Germany's federal framework introduces both diversity and fragmentation; and Lithuania's centralised system values coherence over pluralism. These variations demonstrate that curriculum development is not only an educational but also a cultural and political process shaped by national traditions, governance logics, and understandings of professional expertise.

In sum, while all three systems aim to balance expertise, participation, and accountability, their approaches reveal how similar educational goals can produce markedly different practices. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for reimagining curriculum-making as a collaborative act, that harmonises diverse voices and prepares the ground for more inclusive and responsive music education across Europe.

6. Conclusion

This comparative analysis shows that music curriculum-making is shaped less by formal procedures than by underlying governance logics, cultural norms, and distributions of authority. Across the three systems, expertise plays a central role, yet the degree to which teachers, students, and professional communities can influence curricular decisions remains limited. This raises important questions for music education, where curricular choices carry cultural and symbolic weight and where exclusion of certain voices can directly translate into the exclusion of certain musical identities in the classroom.

These findings are grounded in the comparative analysis of Germany, Ireland, and Lithuania, where differences in governance structures were shown to directly shape the visibility and influence of stakeholder voices in curriculum development. The four analytical dimensions applied in this study revealed consistent patterns across cases, demonstrating how decision-making structures and development processes condition whose voices are heard and whose remain marginal.

The study also highlights a structural tension between standardisation and responsiveness. While competence-based frameworks provide clarity, they risk narrowing the space for culturally situated and creative musical learning. Differences between the countries reveal that outcomes-oriented reforms do not

unfold uniformly; instead, they are filtered through distinct political traditions and institutional arrangements.

Taken together, these insights underline the need to view music curriculum-making as a cultural and political practice that requires broader participation and greater transparency. More inclusive structures, where teachers, learners, and communities act as genuine partners, would strengthen both the democratic legitimacy and the educational relevance of music curricula across diverse contexts.

Implications for music education

The comparison of the three countries points to a clear implication for music education: curriculum development needs to involve a wider circle of people who actually live and shape musical learning every day. When teachers, students, community musicians, and researchers are invited into the conversation from the start, the resulting curriculum becomes more connected to real musical practices, more sensitive to cultural contexts, and more responsive to learners' needs. Transparent procedures and visible decision-making help build trust and make it easier to balance national requirements with the practical knowledge that emerges from classrooms and communities.

These findings also invite stronger advocacy within the music education field. If music education is expected to reflect the diversity of contemporary cultural life, then the processes through which curricula are created must also reflect that diversity. This means creating genuine - not symbolic - opportunities for different voices to contribute: not only expert groups, but also teachers, students, parents, and representatives of various musical traditions. Supporting mixed curriculum boards, long-term dialogue, and shared responsibility can help ensure that music curricula are shaped by the people who will teach, learn, and make music through them. In this way, curriculum development becomes not just an administrative task but a collective effort to make music education more inclusive, meaningful, and culturally alive.

Author Contributions

Conceptualisation and study design were carried out by author 1. Author 1 prepared the original draft and coordinated the final manuscript. Country-specific sections were authored by Author 1 (Germany), Author 2 (Lithuania) and Author 3 (Ireland). Author 2 contributed to the abstract, introduction, and comparative analysis, while Author 3 adapted the theoretical and methodological framework. All authors contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript.

Ethical procedures

Not applicable.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Declaration on the Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence and Digital Tools

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