



Curriculum development re-invented

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5. Curriculum policy and school practice in a European comparative perspective

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5.1 Introduction and research questions

In many countries, the roles of national governments, curriculum development agencies and schools are shifting. In a number of cases the trend is towards more decentralization of curriculum policy. In the Netherlands, for example, the government recently has legislated national curriculum frameworks - in terms of attainment targets - for primary education (ages 4-12) and lower secondary education (ages 12-14), but these attainment targets are much less detailed and much less in number than before and only cover a portion (70%) of the available instructional time. Schools and teachers have got more opportunity for site-specific curriculum choices, emphasizing local ownership and commitment.

At the same time the latitude provided is somewhat restricted as schools have to realize the national attainment targets and are held accountable for the way they give this 'freedom in restraint' a personalized interpretation. In other countries, however, the pendulum seems to move into just the opposite direction (often in response to a too strong decentralization), emphasizing centrally formulated prescriptive standards, often combined with high-stakes assessment of student achievement and with accountability by schools and teachers 'at every corner'.

Those different tendencies elicit numerous questions, with as a common denominator: *What is wisdom?* Do those countries that opt for more school's autonomy take a salutary road, contrary to the ones that consider a more centralized curriculum policy of paramount importance, or should they seriously fear the opposite? Related issues for curriculum debate and research in the context of school improvement are amongst other things: How much commonality is required for equity? How open or closed should a common core be? How to align such a common core with student assessment, for example via national examinations? How to hold schools and teachers accountable for realizing intended student outcomes? How to support curriculum renewal initiatives at school level in such a way that at the same time professional development of teachers as well as school development is fostered, and what, in such a situation, is the added value of external support?

In this context an international comparative trend study has been initiated. The study focuses on school-wide curriculum practices in the compulsory age of schooling in a variation (centralized or decentralized) curriculum policy contexts. Interim results of this study are described in this paper.

The study is sponsored by the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) and is jointly conducted by the University of Twente and the SLO. The study started in the beginning of 2004 and has a follow-up through 2005 and 2006. It has a two-fold aim: (i) getting a sharper understanding of (de)central curriculum policies and practices in various countries in comparison with the Dutch context, and (ii) contributing to a reflection on possibilities for SLO (and possibly also other members of CIDREE, the Consortium of

Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe) to enlarge its expertise in supporting schools in the perspective of more school-based curriculum development.

The study is guided by the following four research questions:

1. *Within selected (primarily European) countries, what does curriculum policy for compulsory education look like with particular regard to (de)centralization and school autonomy?*
2. *How do schools and teachers in those respective contexts address their curriculum challenges?*
3. *What forms of external support are in place to support schools and teachers with those tasks?*
4. *How are schools and teachers held responsible for the education they provide and its outcomes?*

The first research question aims at getting an understanding of curriculum policy features and backgrounds (macro), especially of the position of the pendulum on the scale 'central - decentral' as well as of the direction of the movement of the pendulum. Via the other three questions the effects of the prevailing policy on curriculum practices at school and teacher level (meso) are addressed. In order to find answers to these three questions the study focuses on an analysis of *promising practices* of developing/improving a site-specific curriculum by schools for (especially) lower secondary education, of the role of external support to do so, and of intelligent and productive school and teacher accountability.

5.2 Research design

So far, the study consists of nine cases studies, each representing an education system: Belgium/Flanders, England, Finland, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig-Holstein), Hungary, Portugal, Sweden, U.S.A./California, and the Netherlands. Some of the case studies were conducted in 2004 (Hungary and California), some were carried out in 2004 with a follow-up in 2005 (Belgium, England, Germany/NRW, and Sweden) and some were conducted in 2005 only (Germany/SH, Finland and Portugal). The Netherlands is part of the comparative analysis, based on amongst other things data that have come available via a related R&D project between a number of schools, SLO and the University of Twente. In that project (completed in the fall of 2005) it was explored how Dutch schools for lower secondary education can be successful in addressing curriculum challenges in the context of increasing autonomy. It especially focused on the potentials of teacher design teams as a means to integrate curriculum development, teacher development and school development (Nieveen, Handelzalts & van den Akker, 2005).

In each case study three perspectives are analyzed: policy, research, and practice. The *policy* perspective is studied via an analysis of policy documents and interviews with policy-makers and/or curriculum developers. Topics addressed are: the nature of and reasons to the prevailing and/or envisaged curriculum policy, with particular regard to (the why of) the movement of the pendulum swing; the design and implementation strategy.

The *research* perspective is analyzed via literature and interviews with curriculum researchers who are encouraged to critically reflect on school curriculum policy-making in their country/state, design and implementation strategy applied, and approaches to and results of curriculum development and curriculum research.

The *practice* perspective is portrayed through visits to three to four schools that provide education in the compulsory age of schooling, with a particular focus on lower secondary education. The visits encompass interviews with school management, teachers and students. The focus is on analysis of *promising practices of* - within the variation of policy settings - developing/improving a site-specific curriculum (including perceptions on the prevailing curriculum policy), of the role and perceived added value of external support to do so, and of intelligent and productive school and teacher accountability. A core issue is the interaction between curriculum, teacher and school development in combination with factors and conditions affecting the interaction positively or negatively.

A basic assumption as regards those factors and conditions is that teacher collaboration in curriculum development initiatives is of major importance to school-wide curriculum improvement (Nieveen, Handelzalts & van den Akker, 2005; see also Hord, 2004; Lieberman & Miller, 2004; Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Against this background, more specifically it is analyzed to which extent the schools selected: foster a culture that addresses collaboration and accountability in a meaningful way (Hargreaves, 2003) and embraces distributed leadership (Hargreaves, 2003; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Harris & Muijs, 2005; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Spillane, 2006); dispose of an infrastructure that provides teachers with sufficient time to co-design and learn and with suitable workplaces for joint work (Hargreaves, 1997; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001); have implemented cross-over structures to support conversation and exchange (Fullan, 1999); and have an integrating and synthesizing school management which helps staff attack incoherence, makes connections, and fosters selectivity in policy initiatives impinging upon the school (Fullan, 1999; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

The data collection per case takes about four to five days, preparation and case reporting not included. Results are summarized in a written report for each case, next to which cross-case analyses are conducted. Preliminary results of cross-case analyses have been and will be presented to and discussed with a number of the interviewees during two validation conferences (December 2004 and 2005).

5.3 Interim results

The results summarized in this section only pertain to the cases conducted in 2004 and 2005 and are still preliminary in nature. The nine cases conducted so far have been positioned on the scale ‘centralized – decentralized curriculum policy’ as follows (Figure 5). The figure shows a country/state’s current position on that scale as well as its movement on that scale in the recent past (up till 15 to 20 years ago) and in the near future. The positions, arrows and question marks reflect ‘educated guesses’ that have been validated by interviewees.

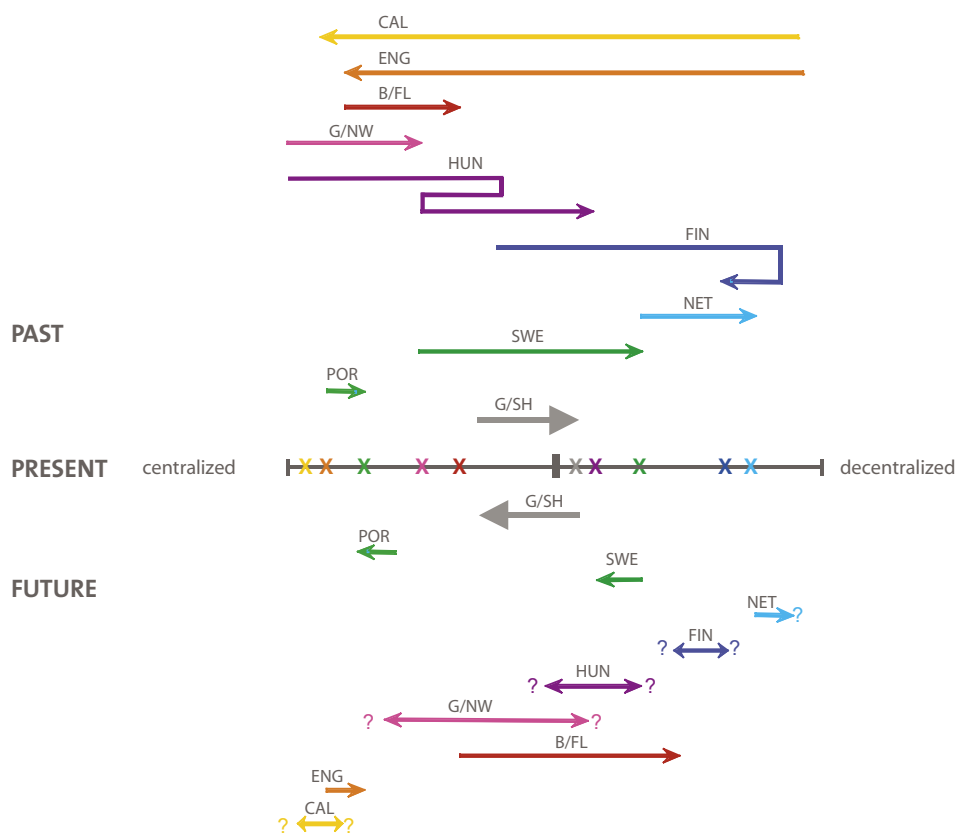


Fig. 5. Characterization of curriculum policies in past, present and future Note: CAL = California; ENG = England; B/FL = Belgium Flanders; FIN = Finland; HUN = Hungary; G/NW = Germany/North Rhine-Westphalia; G/SH = Germany/Schleswig Holstein; NET = Netherlands; POR – Portugal; SWE = Sweden

In explanation of Figure 5 and based on the school visits and interviews conducted so far (especially the practice perspective will get more emphasis in the data collection ahead), the following can be summarized about curriculum policies and practices in California, England, Belgium/Flanders, Germany/North Rhine-Westphalia/Schleswig-Holstein, Hungary, Sweden, and the Netherlands.

5.4 California

Curriculum policy was decentral in the 70's and 80's, since the 90's it is very central. There is much top-down pressure at input level via detailed prescriptive standards, aiming at quality improvement and at fostering equity, in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act (implemented from 2002 onwards). There is hardly space for site-specific choices. Schools and teachers are held in an almost iron grip. High fidelity implementation of the standards along with student performances in the basics (English, mathematics) are enforced and controlled via state-wide, rigorous and regular assessments. Student outcomes are published in school performance tables state-wide. The key-word for this top-down, evidence-based approach is 'accountability' for student performances at every level thinkable: there is great pressure and control by the state on the district, by the district on the school principal, by the school principal on the teacher, and by the teacher on the student. The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC) offers school support via very frequent and systematic feedback on students' performances in the basics.

School and teaching practices are very much standards- and test-driven. Standards and tests almost exclusively focus on the basics, at the expense of the 'non-basics'. For each subject there are two state-approved textbooks. The use of these standards-aligned textbooks is a prerequisite for textbook expenses. The high level of prescription and top-down control focuses the attention on fostering the quality of instruction and indeed seems to be conducive to the performances of children left behind (due to continuous teaching to the test), but at the same time it elicits great frustrations at teacher level. Teachers feel kept after too much and have the feeling of having been put in the role of '*operators of external scripts*'. What is left, is a kind of a '*Karaoke curriculum*'. Especially from researchers the criticism is voiced that schools and teachers are only held accountable for test scores. The excessive focus on test scores for the two basics also results in the neglect of the other subjects (phrased as '*curriculum deadening*').

5.5 England

In the 60's and 70's curriculum policy and practices in England were characterized by a substantial autonomy for schools. However, from 1989 onwards (Margaret Thatcher's third term), England has a statutory national curriculum that applies to all students aged 5-16 in state-maintained schools. It is defined in, amongst other things, four key stages of learning and assessment, programs of study which set out what students should be taught in each subject and in each key stage, and attainment targets which set out the expected standards of students' performance at the end of each key stage. Along with the national curriculum there is a statutory program of age-based achievement testing at the end of key stages 1 (7+; English, mathematics and science), 2 (11+; same subjects) and 3 (14+; all subjects). At the end of key stage 4 (students aged 14-16) there is the centralized GCSE examination. The prevailing version of the national curriculum is in effect from September 2000 onwards. Compared with earlier versions, this version is less prescriptive (i.e. more a framework) and more flexible (i.e. less overloaded).

Besides the national curriculum, there are non-statutory but highly recommended and very influential literacy and numeracy strategies in primary education (key stage 1-2: literacy since 1998, numeracy since 1999) and junior secondary education (key stage 3: literacy and numeracy since 2001), meant to raise standards in these domains. The amount of time to be allocated to each curriculum subject is not officially prescribed for key stages 1-4. However, the strategies have resulted in government recommendations for daily literacy and numeracy 'hours' in key stages 1 and 2, and a recommended minimum three hours of English teaching plus a recommended minimum three hours' mathematics each week for all students.

Ofsted - Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education - publishes school performance tables, showing for each secondary school its GCSE examination performance data pertaining to the 15 year olds. School and teacher accountability is established via external inspections by Ofsted, with a primary focus on student performances. At policy level, there is some room emerging for school's self-evaluation - as a device for more bottom-up school improvement inside national curriculum.

The national curriculum was reviewed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in 1995 and 1999. QCA provides online support for schools to teach the national curriculum by means of, amongst other things:

- *National Curriculum Online*, which sets out the legal requirements of the national curriculum, provides information to help teachers implement it in their schools, and links every national curriculum program of study requirement to resources for teachers,

- *National Curriculum in Action*, which illustrates standards of pupils' work at different ages and key stages and how the programs of study translate into real activities,
- *Schemes of Work*, which shows examples of how the national curriculum programs of study and attainment targets can be translated into a practical plan.

From school visits (four in total) it appeared, among other things, that there is much top-down target setting, not only in the context of the national curriculum but also as part of the strategies. School and teaching practices seem to be very much assessment-led. Perceptions about the national curriculum differ, varying from the view (expressed by the head master of a relatively poorly performing comprehensive school) that *'the totally prescriptive and overloaded national curriculum is a straight jacket'*, to the view (expressed by the head mistress of an other comprehensive school that belongs to the country's top 50 in student achievement) that *'the national curriculum offers sufficient freedom as it only defines learning outcomes, not how to get there. As long as you are successful, you have more autonomy'*. Schools also differ in the way they cope with policy pressures from outside. A low achievement comprehensive school apparently rather uncritically accepts policy edicts and anxiously strives to implement these directives in order to improve the school's performance, while a school with high achievement results critically faces new policy initiatives coming to the school with a balanced mix of cautiousness and self-confidence (*'If we consent with the spirit, we embrace it; if not, we only pay lip service or let the shower blow over. We carefully pick what we think is most appropriate to this school!'*).

5.6 Belgium/Flanders

A 1991 Decree marks the starting point for, as it is called, working in the direction of more autonomy for schools. The Decree regulates a core curriculum in terms of attainment targets for primary and secondary education (in effect since 1997) and for the so-called *eerste graad* and *tweede graad* of secondary education (in effect since 2003). There are subject-specific and cross-curricular attainment targets. The former have been formulated as 'goals to be attained' (knowledge, skills and attitudes), the latter as 'goals to be pursued'. Both types have been developed by the Flemish Department for Educational Development (DVO). Attainment targets need to be elaborated in a school curriculum, which is statutory in primary education and is perceived as statutory in secondary education. Devices to do so are the so-called *Net* curricula, which are developed and disseminated by four umbrella organizations ('Nets') that, among other things, exist for catholic and public schools. *Net* curricula are meant as support for schools to translate the attainment targets into their school curriculum. There are *Net* curricula for primary education and for all subjects in secondary education, all covering about 80% of the time available. The *Net* curricula are

quite influential, in the sense that, to some extent, they have a centralizing counter-effect on the pursuit of realizing more curriculum autonomy.

The Inspectorate of Education (established in 1991) is responsible for quality assurance via school inspection every six years (*schooldoorlichting*). These school inspections focus on the quality of schooling and, as far as secondary education is concerned, also on the quality of schooling in specific subjects, based on context, input, process and output indicators (CIPO model). The Inspectorate mainly focuses on external inspection, although it also encourages schools to build change capacity. However, a formal link between outside evaluation and self-evaluation by schools does not exist. Pedagogical support is offered by Net-bound Pedagogical Support Agencies (PBD's). Contrary to England, there is no ranking of schools.

From one school visit (primary education) it appeared that schools need to make a transition from a situation in which they only had to operate externally provided 'ready-to-eat-chunks' (curricula in the 70's and 80's) to school-based curriculum enactment. Making such a shift is hard, as most schools don't know how to cope with the freedom offered. At the same time the freedom is perceived to be restraint by pressure from the *Net* curricula. There seems to be a common feeling amongst teachers that the attainment targets are too detailed and need to be reduced in number. Teachers seem to perceive the *Net* curricula as overloaded and too prescriptive.

At the moment, additional data is being collected at four schools for secondary education (*eerste graad*).

5.7 Germany

Education policy belongs to the responsibility of the federal states (*Länder*). All federal states have a layered education system. After the *Grundschule* (years 1 through 4, from age 6 onwards) there are four secondary education tracks: the *Hauptschule* (years 5 through 9 or 10), the *Realschule* (years 5 through 10), the *Gymnasium* (years 5 through 10 plus *Oberstufe* during years 11 through 13, from 2006-2007 onwards years 11 and 12), and the comprehensive *Gesamtschule* (years 5 through 13).

Inspired by poor performances in PISA and TIMSS and in the context of political changes, curriculum policy in **North Rhine-Westphalia** is on the edge of shifting from a heavily centralized system (*Lehrplane*) to an approach that aims to combine goal steering and output control (via standards) at the federal state level with carefully fostering school

autonomy. Main features of this new policy in NRW are:

- A core curriculum (*Kernlehrplane*), defined in statutory attainment targets/standards, for mathematics, German and the foreign languages (in effect since September 2004).
- School-based parallel assessment (*Parallelarbeiten*, i.e. assessment in all schools at the same time) for a selection of subjects in years 3 (ages 9/10), 7 (ages 13/14), 10 (ages 16/17) and 11/12. Initially, this assessment was mandatory for all years mentioned. Next, the obligation was cancelled for the years 3 and 7. Recently, the same happened for year 10.
- State-wide statutory assessment for the core subjects in year 4 and at beginning year 9, related to the *Kernlehrplane* (in effect from November 2004). Schools are allowed to compose a test based on an own selection of items from a central item bank.
- Central exams at the end of year 4 (ages 10/11) and at the end of year 9 (ages 15/16), directly linked with the *Kernlehrplane* (in effect since 2006).
- Independent school inspection. The inspection system is currently under revision, in the sense that one is searching for new ways to combine inspection and inspection for improvement in a meaningful way in all five districts in NRW.

At school level the new curriculum policy implies more leeway than already available for schools to set their own priorities and internal evaluation of school development (via the so-called *Schulprogramm*, statutory from 1997 onwards). As it seems, schools have difficulty in coping with the latter task due to a ‘tsunami’ of rules. At the same time both the new standards and the central examinations impose many restrictions. Like in Belgium/ Flanders, there is no ranking of schools in school performance tables. A prominent external support agency is LfS (*Landesinstitut für Schule*). This agency is currently shifting from curriculum development to quality assurance tasks (based on the standards). By means of 300 moderators LfS provides schools with support at implementing changes. As yet, schools don’t seem to make much use of the support provided, as they are primarily interested in trying to articulate what they would like to do themselves.

From school visits the picture emerged that schools are still fully autonomous in assessment. There are no central school-leaving examinations yet at the end of lower secondary education (ages 10-16). The envisaged implementation of central exams at the end of the highly selective lower secondary education is perceived as a top-down threat. Schools vary in the way they anticipate the implementation of the attainment targets as well as the assessment regime. One school watches this development with shiver and resistance; another perceives it as a next opportunity for school development. There is much space for own choices offered and taken, but schools feel insecure about how the Inspectorate will respond to the way schools fill in the space.

Schleswig Holstein has frame curricula which offer a rather substantial amount of freedom for schools' own choices. However, schools perceive these frameworks as rather overloaded and partly irrelevant for school practice. Parts of these frame curricula are currently being specified via the implementation of standards for the subjects German, mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics. The standards describe knowledge and skills to be attained at the end of the *Grundschule*, year 9 (*Hauptschulabschluss*) and year 10 (*mittleren Schulabschluss*).

Changes in curriculum policy in Schleswig Holstein are due to the poor performances of German students in PISA, worries about the quality of teachers as well as a recent political shift. The current government headed by the CDU (since 2005 a political majority in the *Landtag*) puts much emphasis on improving the quality of education, on making outcomes transparent, and on improving the communication with parents and relationships between teachers and parents. Fostering the autonomy of schools goes hand in hand with more schools' accountability. An important means for doing so is *Externe Evaluation im Team* (EViT): external school inspections by especially set up teams using protocols. IPTS, an institute formerly responsible for teacher training and school support, has made a shift towards quality assurance and the development and implementation of standards (and has been renamed into IQSH). Pre-service and in-service training of teachers takes place via subject-bound conferences. In-service training has been centralized and is voluntary. Teachers indicated not to be convinced of the added value of these changes (Grabbe-Letschert & Letschert, 2006).

5.8 Hungary

Hungary has been a centralized country for decades. In the early 80's a first diversification from centrally directed curriculum policy came to the surface. From 1998 onwards a two-polar curricular regulation system was implemented, obliging every school to prepare its own school curriculum within the broader framework of a national curriculum (NAT) for Years 1-10 (students aged 6-16). In 2000, the two-polar system was replaced by a tri-polar one: *school curricula* within the broader context of a *national curriculum* plus, in-between, statutory so-called *frame curricula*. The national curriculum 2000 is defined in terms of attainment targets for ten 'cultural domains' for years 4 (age 10), 6 (age 12) and 8 (age 14) and addresses cross-curricular themes. The attainment targets cover 50% to 70% of the compulsory teaching time. The frame curricula contain detailed content prescriptions per subject per year, including the minimum time allocation per subject. The frame curricula were developed and implemented in order to assist schools and teachers in the interpretation of the national curriculum and to re-ensure more quality and uniformity of

education across the country. Since 2002, schools have to prepare their school curriculum based on a revised (competence-based) national curriculum. In addition, the status of the frame curricula changed from compulsory to non-compulsory in order to reduce over-regulation and to restore professional autonomy of schools and teachers. In 1998, central tests were introduced at the end of years 4, 6 and 8, meant to support teachers' assessment. The matriculation examination at end year 10 (age 16) is the only summative assessment. Hungary does not have an Inspectorate of Education.

From school visits the following picture emerged. The 'intermediate' frame curricula are rather traditional in nature. Nevertheless, they are perceived as valuable for schools lacking reform capacity. So far, the frame curricula combined with textbooks and the matriculation examination are more influential on school and teaching practices than the national curriculum. An educated guess by teachers interviewed is that the national curriculum will increase in influence due to the implementation (from 2004-2005 onwards) of a revised matriculation examination that reflects the national curriculum 2002. There is a clear tension between the revised national curriculum (innovative and ambitious) and the more traditional, subject-based frame curricula. Assessment arrangements and facilities are poor. Schools have much autonomy. However, amongst teachers there is a common feeling of frustration combined with innovation tiredness due to the lack of any external support as well as the fact that a new government means a new curriculum policy. As a consequence, it seems teachers have gradually developed a strong 'laissez faire' attitude to the government's education policy. As far as external support is concerned, there are county pedagogical institutes, but the service they offer to schools is weak. Schools need external support, but it is hardly available. From 1994 to 1998 the National Institute for Public Education (OKI) offered external support to schools by providing them with examples of local school curricula. As it appears, this data bank of about 600 examples did not work.

5.9 Sweden

Sweden had a strongly centralized curriculum policy for a long time. However, since the 60's and the 70's the country has been slackening the reins of government control a bit. Nowadays, curriculum policy can be characterized as goal steering at the national level incorporating substantial local responsibility. Sweden has a national curriculum (*Läroplan*) for the comprehensive school (*grundskola*) since several decades. The most recent curriculum was introduced in schools in 1995 (Lpo 94) and it pertains to the compulsory school for students aged 7-16 (year 1-9). Since 1998 it also includes the pre-school class for children aged 6-7 where this is provided in the *grundskola*, and after school centers. It describes goals and guidelines of two kinds:

- aims (or goals to be pursued), which indicate the direction of the school's work and thus the development of the desired standards
- attainment targets (or goals to be achieved), which express the minimum achievements required on leaving school.

It is the responsibility of the school and the school authorities to ensure students are given the opportunities to attain these goals. The national curriculum also prescribes a minimum teaching entitlement, in terms of the total amount of teaching time for the nine years of compulsory schooling broken down by subject. It is up to the schools (in casu the school's board of governors) to decide how these hours should be allocated in the timetable over the nine years of schooling. Some schools, for example, allocate more hours to the teaching of Swedish and mathematics in the early years of the *grundskola*. Apart from the national curriculum there are binding *subject syllabuses*. These syllabuses determine the goals and content of teaching per subject and thus define the conditions governing teachers' choice of methods and materials.

Municipalities are responsible for the implementation of the national curriculum. Each municipality must state in a *skolplan* how it intends to attain national goals for its schools and how schools are to be organized and developed. Each school has to draw a *yearly quality review*. From 2006 onwards an adapted national curriculum will be in effect. Schools have the obligation to enact students' personal development plans and to implement with cross-curricular projects. Some people perceive this change as a sign of a growing interference by the central government and, as a consequence, as a slight course correction in the direction of centralization.

Common national tests in Swedish, English and mathematics are given at the end of year 5 and 9, but are only compulsory for schools (and not for students) at the end of year 9 (age 16). Marks are only awarded from Year 8. There are no national examinations on completion of post-compulsory upper secondary school. The Swedish National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*) is responsible for the curriculum development and enactment (national curriculum and syllabuses), inspection, and improvement support. Since 2003, the inspection function has been accommodated by the National Agency for Education's Educational Inspectorate, and the improvement support by the National Agency for School Improvement. Both are part of *Skolverket*.

Visits to three schools in the Stockholm area resulted in the following characterization of school and teaching practices:

- Teams of teachers are responsible for a large group of students (80). Teachers follow a group for a number of years.

- Each term (so, twice a year) there is a 'developmental dialogue' of about one hour between teacher, pupil and parents.
- Students are given a great responsibility for their own work as well as for the school environment (based on regulations in the national curriculum).
- The schools visited look like a learning environment for teachers (teaching, collaboration with fellow teachers, professional development), with individual and shared working places for teachers.
- Schools seem to deliberately invest in teacher and team development.
- The yearly quality review varies in format and procedure.
- There is quite a lot of autonomy for schools within the municipality *skolplan*. It is up to the school to decide upon how to achieve the goals set by the municipality.
- The national government exerts more influence via the Inspectorate than via the *läroplan*. At the same time the central tests taken at the end of years 5 and 9 are more influential than the national curriculum. The general impression is that those central tests are quite a proper representation of the national curriculum.

5.10 Portugal

In the mid 70's Portugal started to struggle itself out of a dictatorial regime that had hold the country firmly in its grip for more than half a century. Not surprisingly, curriculum policy in Portugal still has strongly centralized features. At policy level there is a tendency towards more curriculum autonomy for schools against the background of the national curriculum for basic education. In practice, however, the autonomy movement hardly affects the meso level. Basic education has been implemented from 1986 onwards.

It takes nine years (compulsory education) and encompasses three cycles: years 1 through 4 (1st cycle, ages 6-10), years 5 and 6 (2nd cycle, ages 10-12), and years 7 through 9 (3rd cycle, ages 12-15). The first national curriculum for basic education dates from 1986 and was reviewed in 2001. For every cycle it describes attainment targets, contents (subjects and cross-curricular activities) and the minimum time allocation per cluster of subjects and cross-curricular activities. Portugal has a school inspection system.

A major problem in Portugal is that a coherent implementation strategy is lacking. Reforms are hardly facilitated. Schools complain about much top-down pressure, lack of support, lack of budget, huge bureaucracy as well as poor professional development supply and facilities. The national curriculum is perceived as rather prescriptive and impedes flexibility and the making of own choices. In addition to that, teachers use to operate rather solitarily. The inspectorate focuses primarily on school management quality (no quality improvement support). Although school self-evaluation is mandatory, schools don't perceive it as such.

5.11 Finland

From the beginning of the 70's Finland has gradually changed from a tracked and very centralized education system towards a nine-year comprehensive school for children of the ages 7 to 16 (compulsory basic education). There is a national curriculum for the comprehensive school since 1985. Completely in line with the then time spirit in Finland, this national curriculum consisted of very detailed prescriptions defined in terms of goals and contents. It provided hardly space for schools' own choices. This situation changed rather radically with the introduction, in 1994, of a revised national curriculum. This version was half as voluminous as the 1985 one and was the exponent of what one of the Finnish interviewed designated as *'the most decentralized curriculum policy in the world'*. The freedom offered to schools was that substantial that they didn't know how to cope with. According to the Finnish National Board of Education (responsible for the development and review of the national curriculum) it also caused too much variety across schools. So, in order to offer more structure and in order to create more uniformity, the 1994 curriculum in its turn was replaced by a more prescriptive document that will be implemented from 2006 onwards and is almost as voluminous as the 1985 version. The 2006 national curriculum is defined in terms of objectives, core contents per subject for a cluster of years (1-2, 3-5, 6-9) and final assessment criteria at the end of year 9. A major difference with the 1994 curriculum is the insertion per subject of standards (phrased as 'descriptions of good performance') at the end of years 2 and 5. Along with the increased emphasis on the monitoring of students progress, these 'bus stops' are meant to provide schools with more structured support not only for reaching the final destination (objectives) but also for finding the route to it. Part of the 2006 national curriculum is also a new distribution of lesson hours in terms of the minimum amount of weekly lessons per year per subject or cluster of subjects. Finland has not an inspectorate of education. Interviewees indicated that there is no need for an inspectorate system as there is a great trust in the professionalism of teachers who all need to have a master qualification and are generally respected. There is a strong focus on school self evaluation as well as on external evaluations conducted yearly by the *Evaluation Council for Education and Training* at the end of year 9 in a sample of schools. Every school sampled is provided with written school specific feedback.

Finnish students are high achievers in PISA. Possible explanations for these good performances are the following:

- Contrary to the Netherlands, children in lower secondary education (years 6-9) are grouped in classes based on age and ability level. Schools receive extra funding for grouping children in smaller classes for certain subjects (e.g. mathematics, foreign languages), while for other subjects class size can be enlarged. In doing so, it is possible to pay more attention to poorly performing students.

- The composition of the student population is strongly homogeneous.
- Both the teacher profession and the quality of teacher training are highly thought-of (although there is also some criticism on the pedagogical-theoretical character of teacher training). Only 15% of the students who sit for the entrance exam is admitted to enroll.
- The noses of Finnish teachers point in the same direction. As far as there are rules, they are generally followed dutifully.

Anyway, the good performances in PISA are put in perspective strongly here and there: what the PISA tests measure, it is reasoned, matches only partly with ambitions reflected by the Finnish intended curriculum.

A visit to a school (years 7-9 plus upper secondary education for children ages 17-19) in the outskirts of Helsinki learned that at the moment there are two parallel developments. Firstly, the 2006 national curriculum clearly marks a slight but undeniable movement towards centralization. Nevertheless, schools keep a substantial amount of curriculum autonomy, which still is perceived as a great good ('Schools are different and should be different.'). Second, cooperation between schools is strongly fostered at the local level. This offers schools the opportunity to assume a certain profile in mutual agreement.

5.12 The Netherlands

In the Netherlands the content of education was not an object of great dispute in education policy in the 70's. In fact it was a non-issue. Contents were rather stable and had been laid down in examination programs. There was hardly any doubt about the quality of education. However, from the 70's to the 90's the government's commitment with the content of education gradually increased, in order to stimulate the continuous development of students as well as equity. The government started to pursue a 'constructive' education policy, featured by a strong top-down control of large-scale innovations. In order to support schools an extensive school support system was created, amongst which national institutes for educational measurement (CITO) and curriculum development (SLO). SLO's task was to design and develop 'models for' curricula at various levels. The phrasing 'models for' was crucial, as any appearance of centralized curriculum policy from the side of SLO should be avoided.

The times are changing though since a decade. Trust in the top-down steering of large-scale changes has been replaced by fostering site-specific commitment and ownership, initially as regards school administrative issues, increasingly also pertaining to the process and outcomes of education. A strong movement has been emerging - not only in education but

also in other societal sectors - towards autonomy and market forces. The basic assumption is that local ownership contributes to the quality of education. However, as regards curriculum policy there is still some ambiguity. On the one hand, schools are given ample room to make site-specific choices (resulting in more variation). On the other hand, there is still an undeniable tendency to central regulation and control by means of both the obligation to accountability, external evaluation by the inspectorate of education, and pleas for standards.

Nevertheless, curriculum policy is very decentralized and can be designated as 'fewer rules and more ambition'. There are curriculum frameworks for both primary education (ages 4-12) and lower secondary education (ages 13-14). The frameworks have been defined in terms of attainment targets (general goals to be pursued, covering two-third of the teaching time available) and, for lower secondary education, a non-mandatory timetable. Schools have much space for (re)designing their site-specific curriculum. The attainment targets differ substantially from those in, for example, California and England in the sense that they are much less in number. They have substantially decreased in number as time went by (for primary education, for example, the number decreased from 464 in 1988, via 122 in 1993 and 103 in 1998, to 58 from 2005 onwards; more or less the same is true for lower secondary education). Also, they are much less detailed and at the same time different in nature. They do not specify content and teaching methodologies. They are meant as a source of inspiration for schools and teachers to make site-specific choices as well as a frame of reference for public accountability as regards choices, efforts and outcomes. Schools and teachers are accountable for the way schools give 'freedom in restraint' a personalized interpretation. The attainment targets for lower secondary education, for example, have been grouped per content area: ten for Dutch language, eight for English, nine for mathematics, eight for science, twelve for social science, five for art and culture, six for physical education. As an additional support for schools 'scenarios' have been developed.

These scenarios, representing four 'levels' of innovative ambitions, are the following:

- scenario 1: separate subjects; arrangements between teachers with regard to overlap between related subjects
- scenario 2: separate subjects plus, at regular intervals, cross-curricular projects or themes
- scenario 3: clustering of separate subjects into learning domains, like social science, science, art and culture, and physical education
- scenario 4: not contents/subjects but competencies are the starting point for teaching and learning.

There is no statutory program of age-based achievement testing at end of primary (age 12) and lower secondary (age 14) education. There are influential school-leaving examinations

at age 16 (*vmbo*), age 17 (*havo*) and age 18 (*vwo*), consisting of both an external (i.e. central) and a school-bound (de-central) part. The school-bound part is partly practical in nature. About 80% of the primary schools participate in a standardized test that is administered in grade 8 (age 11/12). This is a non-mandatory but very influential test, developed by the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO) and meant to help teachers, students and their parents in choosing the appropriate level of secondary education. Based on a 2002 Act, the role of the Inspectorate of Education is twofold: (i) inspection, by assessing the quality of education in terms of the education a school provides as well as its output (student outcomes and progress) and by reporting on it, and (ii) inspection for improvement, by fostering the self-regulative power of schools (school development). A school's self-evaluation report is the starting point for a quality review by the Inspectorate every four years (*periodiek kwaliteitsonderzoek*). So far, the primary focus of the Inspectorate is on inspection. Schools and teachers are accountable, but accountability not exclusively pertains to test scores. Inspection results are published in newspapers and magazines, but these rankings are much less influential than those in California and England.

In the context of increasing autonomy for schools, in primary and secondary education a reform is taking place in which two main streams can be distinguished. There is a small group of literally and metaphorically newly built schools, which have started recently or which are making preparations to start in the very near future based on an innovative philosophy of teaching and learning. In addition to these newly developed schools, there is a rapidly increasing number of schools that strive to renew ('renovate') their existing curriculum and school organization.

5.13 Tentative main findings and conclusions

From the preliminary case-specific findings described above, the most striking cross-case results are the following.

All countries and states studied have a national curriculum for compulsory education. These documents have been defined in terms of goals and objectives (attainment targets, whether or not specified into standards), an indication or listing of contents (subjects or clusters of subjects, sometimes also cross-curricular themes) as well as generally a rationale. In some cases also a distribution of lesson hours per (cluster of) subject(s) is provided. This distribution is either mandatory (minimum amount of teaching time, e.g. Sweden and Finland) or non-mandatory (the Netherlands). Goals, objectives and contents vary from detailed prescriptions (e.g. California) to rather an open-ended, more or less frame of reference (e.g. Hungary, the Netherlands). However, all are mandatory in nature.

Striking phenomena are the 'intermediate' curriculum frameworks that are meant to (further) specify the national common core. Examples of those are the schemes of work in England, the 'net' curricula in Belgium/Flanders, the frame curricula in Hungary, and subject syllabuses in Sweden. These intermediate curriculum frameworks are generally rather traditional and detailed in nature.

In several countries/states (Hungary, the two German *Länder*, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands) schools have (some) space for site-specific choices in the context of the national curriculum. As far as space is available, schools vary strongly in their capability to enact the autonomy offered. Schools also vary in the way they cope with policy pressures from outside (see, for example, England).

In Finland and Sweden the pendulum is slightly but unmistakably swinging back in the direction of centralization. This pendulum movement is not as much (Sweden) or not only (Finland) caused by increasing government control as regards goals, objectives and contents (the 'what'), but more by a growing government's involvement in teaching and learning (the 'how'). In both countries tailor-made instruction is fostered via an intervention at the central level. Tailor-made instruction is also emphasised in the Netherlands (see the 'newly built' and 'newly rebuilt' school development), but strikingly enough this is being strived for by a more relaxing government policy.

England and California are exemplary for countries/states with a nation and state-wide, rather rigorous assessment system, with school and teacher accountability (based on assessment results) on every corner. Curriculum policy in North Rhine-Westphalia and Schleswig Holstein seems to tend into the same direction. Such an outcomes-based accountability culture does not exist in the Netherlands. In a number of countries (e.g. Sweden and Finland) also interim or final tests are administered, but those are not geared towards the measurement (and improvement) of outcomes at the level of the individual student but towards monitoring the quality (and improvement) of education at system level.

There is room for self-evaluation by schools - as a device for school development - in the two German states (*Schulprogramm*), Sweden (yearly quality review), Finland, the Netherlands (hesitantly), and England (on the policy agenda, within the national curriculum).

In a number of countries/states (England, Sweden, the Netherlands, the two German states) the role of the Inspectorate is changing from inspection only to inspection plus improvement support. These twin roles seem to be at odds and, as a consequence and not amazingly, seem to get off the ground only with difficulty as inspection and inspection for improvement

differ from each other as regards function and goal. In addition, school management and teachers are inclined to perceive inspectors primarily as external evaluators ('judges') rather than partners in school improvement. Also, the Inspectorate itself seems to be not familiar enough with its new role and its implications.

Schools dislike too much centralism, get frustrated by too frequent policy swings (e.g. Hungary) and appreciate a balance between central structure and local autonomy.

With regard to external support there are many differences across countries. Support offered to schools varies from much to little, from tailor-made and bottom-up to forced and top-down, from large-scale to school-based, from varied supply to focused supply, and from support via Internet to personal support.

Conclusions

One of the aims of this study is to get a sharper understanding of (de)central curriculum policies and practices in various countries in comparison with the Dutch context. When we compare the Netherlands with the other eight cases, then the final conclusion is inevitable that the Netherlands is the uncrowned king of curriculum autonomy.

However, some nuances and comments should be added to this main conclusion.

First, there are large differences between education sectors in the Netherlands. There is much more curriculum autonomy in primary and lower secondary education than in upper secondary education. The room of movement drastically decreases - or is perceived as drastically decreasing - as school-leaving examinations come closer (pre-shadowing effect).

Second, several schools for primary and lower secondary education are trying to enact the freedom offered (see, again, the 'newly built' and 'newly rebuilt' school development), but by sticking to the textbook much 'strategic space' (a famous phrasing of a former team manager of the Dutch soccer team) stays unutilized. In addition, from a monitor study on curriculum (re)design efforts in lower secondary education (2005) the picture emerges that schools have taken up the gauntlet, but that there are large discrepancies between innovation rhetoric and actual functioning of schools, and beliefs and perceptions of principals and those of teachers.

Third, a recent study conducted by Nieveen, Handelzalts and van Eekelen (2006, in preparation) shows that, in the opinion of teachers, the 58 attainment targets for lower secondary education have been formulated so broadly that they are perceived and used neither as guiding nor as inspirational tool. Instead, they are used as a kind of a control and accountability instrument *afterwards*, in the context of external evaluations conducted by the inspectorate.

Figure 5 shows that pendulum movements between, on the one hand, government steering and control and, on the other hand, school autonomy can be violent (see, for instance, California, England and Hungary). There are also striking differences between countries as regards their position on the scale in the past, at the moment and in the future.

An intriguing question is the why of the various movements and especially the why of reversals (which is still under analysis). The movements seem to be a repeating chain of action-reaction. In the context of (often but not only) a political field of force, a too strong movement towards decentralization in the end results in a movement in the opposite direction (more top-down steering and control), and the other way around. The figure shows that in a country with an extreme position on the scale centralized-decentralized, sooner or later (and apparently by a physical law) a reaction will take place or can be expected. Basically, this is what is happening in countries like England (less prescription more flexibility), Finland (insertion of descriptions of good performance or standards, in order to create more structure and uniformity) and Sweden (nano curriculum).

From this perspective, a reversal in the Netherlands seems only to be a matter of time. In a letter sent to a national newspaper, van den Akker and Peters (2006) in their role of director curriculum development respectively general director of SLO, put forward the proposition that, although commitment from the side of schools and teachers has proven to be extremely conducive to the effectiveness and sustainability of improvement and renewal efforts, also school autonomy has its limits - like tight government steering has. There are, both authors argue, considerable challenges of major public importance and beyond separate schools (e.g. careful decision-making about what knowledge is most worth teaching) that call for a combining of forces as well as a coherent direction and a regulating role from the side of the national government. A government that wants to promote diversity is at the same time responsible for stimulating substantive and social cohesion, fostering equity, and promoting collective socio-economic interests.

This begs the question what would be a wise strategy. It seems to make sense to keep away from tight prescriptions via detailed standards, from an exaggerated belief in 'nothing moves unless tested', and from an obsessive focus on test scores only (cf. California). Rather it seems sensible to maintain and reinforce the major strength of current curriculum policy: i.e. fostering bottom-up renewal initiatives. Schools, van den Akker and Peters put forward, are not looking for national prescriptive frameworks. Instead, they gladly would be inspired by promising and prototypical practical examples of how to (re)design their site-specific curriculum in the context of the attainment targets. The expectation is that such procedurally and substantively specified examples - possibly including 'descriptions of good performance' for certain age levels (cf. Finland) - will be more inspiring for schools and teachers than the current set of attainment targets. In combination with the development

and diffusion of these curricular examples, much more time, money and effort should be invested in teachers' professional development.

In the following chapters we present an anthology of case studies carried out in the context of the collaborative project between SLO and the University of Twente, focused on curriculum policy in European countries. A selection of case studies was presented at the 'Leiden-conference'.