



# Curriculum development re-invented

Proceedings of the invitational conference  
on the occasion of 30 years SLO 1975-2005  
Leiden, the Netherlands, 7 - 9 December 2005

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# 1. Introduction

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From 7 till 9 December 2005 the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development SLO organized an invitational conference within the framework of its 30th anniversary. The conference was focused on the topic reinventing curriculum development. The conference location was the National Museum of Natural History 'Naturalis' in Leiden. Invited were head teachers, politicians, researchers, curriculum developers, inspectors, and guidance and evaluation officers in the Netherlands and other European countries.

SLO was founded thirty years ago by the Dutch government to give independent, professional advice on, and support for, curriculum innovation, development, and implementation. In performing its tasks, SLO tries to take account of developments in society in general, as well as internationally, and in education in particular. SLO virtually works in all education sectors including primary education, secondary education, special education, vocational education and teacher education, and covers all subject areas. Its central task is to advise the Government on important education reforms and new curricula. SLO supports and coordinates curriculum development in cooperation with schools and universities, carries out curriculum evaluations and provides information about learning materials.

In the thirty years of existence forms, functions and expectations of curriculum, curriculum development and curriculum policy have changed. The concept *curriculum* changed from a more or less prescriptive book or syllabus, defined on a central level, to a more process oriented challenge for schools to define their own curriculum policy within the context of a rather open framework.

The fact that SLO has celebrated its birthday party in a museum could suggest that curriculum development is something of the past, something to cherish, to place behind glass, or to stuff like the animals in this museum of natural history. There is no truth in it. SLO strongly believes that curriculum development is 'alive and kicking'. At the same time, and with respect for the past, SLO also believes that the concept *curriculum* and the process of *curriculum development* have got some connotations, which are ready for redefinition.

This apparently curious disunity of thoughts - curriculum is alive and kicking, but at the same time ready for reinvention - has to do with the remarkable speed of development of the concept *curriculum* during a rather short period. Although 'curriculum' is of all ages, curriculum studies defined as an independent and substantial scientific approach, exist only since relatively short time. The American curriculum expert William Schubert mentions a period of one hundred years. One of the first books in the educational history with the term 'curriculum' in its title is John Dewey's book 'The child and curriculum' (1902).

It is interesting to see, especially in the Netherlands, where the current curriculum debate seems to be predominated by what we call 'old learning' and 'new learning', that this distinction between 'old' and 'new' has already been a main topic for Dewey and that he also used the same labels and nearly the same arguments as we do nowadays. So, 'reinventing curriculum development' obviously has to do with 'rediscovering your own roots'.

Curriculum and curriculum development are not only issues for schools and teachers; both have broad impact, importance and relevance for the sustained development of communities. More than ever curriculum is, or should be, in the centre of daily life and in the responsibility of the society in general. Let me explain that by giving two examples that attracted my attention.

In September 2005, the Dutch government presented as usual, the plans for the next period. In the Netherlands, this is called 'Prinsjesdag', and it is quite a happening. A journalist of one of the Dutch newspapers interviewed students from secondary education and asked them, if they had seen the presentation of the plans on television. 'Of course not' was the answer, 'we were at school'. The emphatic character of that reaction tells a lot about how far the curriculum apparently has been insulated from today's life. In the same month I saw an advertisement in 'Educational Leadership', the magazine of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), that said: Make the New York Times your interdisciplinary curriculum.

The product-oriented interpretation of the *curriculum* concept gradually changed to a more process-based interpretation, in some cases even in a rather philosophical kind of view. For the American educationalist Pinar for instance, the concept curriculum has developed in a direction far beyond the regular interpretation of curriculum as a syllabus or a table of contents. He considers *curriculum* as 'the site on which the generations struggle to define themselves and the world'. For Pinar, the curriculum particularly represents a way of being, a way of giving meaning, a process of defining principles, standards and values. You may even say (Letschert, 2004) that the main interest is looking for an answer for the basic question: what kind of people do we want to be, and what can we do to achieve this through education?

In nearly all cases, curricula result from a mixture of the retrospective, the reflective, and the progressive point of view. For example, all curricula give ample attention to our cultural heritage, to present-day-society, as well as to the preparation of pupils for the future. By dealing with these components, big variety of emphasises are found. The core question in curriculum development therefore is to achieve a workable balance. This balance will never be permanent, but will have to be found again and again. The balance is continuously

shifting. The present day will gradually become history. The future is gradually turning into reality. Each newly found balance will be disturbed at a later stage, when once again a new balance will have to be achieved. Within this process different degrees of freedom and various interested parties exist. This is what makes curriculum development such an exciting, challenging and difficult – but above all - continuous process.

During this delicate balancing-process, important and interesting questions have to be considered:

- How can we connect suitable pedagogical and educational concepts with the shifting public views, values and standards that develop in the evolving society?
- How can we offer intellectual challenges to each pupil in order to make education attractive, motivating, and effective for pupils as well for society?
- How can we materialize pedagogical, educational and subject-related views in advanced teaching materials and in challenging learning environments?
- How can we adapt new views and valuable insights from other disciplines?
- How can we make the curriculum tangible for teachers and at the same time applicable in the available time of teaching?
- How can we create consistency with the various curriculum components, such as vision, goals, contents, learning activities, teachers' roles, educational tools, grouping ways, locations, applicable age groups, and evaluation methods?
- What are important criteria to assess the relevance of the curriculum for pupils, as well as for the economical, social, cultural, spiritual society in which they grow up?

These questions are key issues for policy makers and curriculum developers, and they constantly need reconsideration and reflection. This process is loaded with values and multiple interpretations. As a result, it will often lead to highly differentiated and sometimes opposing views.

This book consists of two parts. Part A contains an introduction, the two keynote speeches and the dinner speech of the Dutch minister of Education, Culture and Science. Part B contains case studies and information about the output of group discussion based on country presentations.

The main challenge for the participants of the invitational conference of SLO is: how to implement ideals into practice, and what role does curriculum development play in that process? Wide differences occur between intended curricula and the actual implementation of these, even if an intended curriculum is fixed and compulsory, for example in the form of core goals, standards, or a national programme.

Two eminent keynote speakers illuminate this subject. Professor Jan van den Akker, Director Curriculum of SLO and Head of the Department Curriculum Design and Educational Innovation of the University of Twente, by sketching the playground, the stakeholders, the challenges and the pitfalls. Professor David Hopkins, from the University of London, does the same from another perspective, i.e. emphasizing the role of leadership in curriculum development and other processes of educational innovation.

In her table speech at the conference dinner, the Dutch minister of Education, Maria van der Hoeven, compared curriculum development with a search or quest, using a story of the Brazilian author Paulo Coelho as a metaphor to redefine the specific task of SLO. Coelho's story is about an Andalusian shepherd who ventures from his homeland in Spain to North Africa looking for a treasure buried in the Pyramids. Along the way he meets a beautiful, young gypsy woman, a man who calls himself a king, and an alchemist. They all show him the way in the direction of his quest, but no one knows what the treasure is or if he can surmount the obstacles on his way through the desert. However, what began as a boyish adventure to discover exotic places and worldly wealth turns into a quest for treasures only found in himself.

The SLO conference has been placed in an international perspective. In cooperation with the University of Twente, SLO is carrying out a European research project titled: Curriculum development in (de)centralized policy contexts. Not only in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere in and outside Europe, 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. However, in other countries the pendulum seems to move in the opposite direction, emphasizing centrally formulated, prescriptive standards combined with considerable demands on assessment at different levels. During the conference case studies have been presented and some of those are included in this collection. A general overview of the tentative results of the study, presented during the conference by Wilma Kuiper, associate professor of the University of Twente, is also part of the proceedings.

Finally, a report of the discussion in sub groups, following the presentation of the case studies - made by Joanna Le Metais, educational researcher and consultant - is added to this collection.

We hope this volume is going to be a valuable contribution to the ongoing debate concerning the contemporary interpretation of curriculum concept and curriculum development in the process of school development, of ownership in innovation and teacher responsibility.