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SEARCHING FOR MORE EFFECTIVE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

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Introduction

Since 1988 we have been engaged in collaborative research activities aimed at increasing the effectiveness of professional curriculum development in our country (The Netherlands). Several stages in this endeavour can be discerned:

- A preliminary study (problem analysis; conceptualization) [1988–1989].
- Retrospective case studies of 18 completed development projects [1989–1990].
- Devising promising procedural guidelines for the design, construction, evaluation, and implementation of curriculum plans and materials [1990–1992].
- Systematic, empirical validation and refinement of those guidelines [1992–?].

This symposium will deal with the rationale for and the preliminary outcomes of this research in progress.

Perspective and framework for the research

The organization of curriculum development in the Netherlands reflects the general educational policy of balancing between central regulations and decentral autonomy. The National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) publishes curricular plans and materials that have only an exemplary, not an obligatory, status. Everyone is free to use these products and to adapt them to their own situation and needs. This agreement has been made for political reasons (constitutional freedom of education), but also because of economical (relation with educational publishers) and innovative (stimulation of active use) arguments. In terms of Walker (1979, 1990), one can characterize the organization as aiming at interaction between 'generic' curriculum development by a center (SLO) and 'site specific' activities by schools and teachers, while also various 'intermediary' organizations (e.g. educational publishers, inservice training institutes) play an important role.

The SLO, in operation since 1976, has carried out dozens of curriculum development projects for (subjects in) primary, secondary, vocational, and adult education. In recent years there was a growing concern about the lack of reliable and systematic knowledge of the development strategies that actually have been used in the past. This was seen as an obstacle to learn from previous experiences and to improve the professional methods, procedures, and techniques for curriculum development. The need for this improvement was strengthened by the

results of several evaluation studies on the impact of SLO projects that raised serious doubts about the effectiveness of the development activities. These concerns have led to this series of studies, starting with a preliminary analysis of SLO policies and practices and an extensive study of the international literature on curriculum development strategies. This resulted in a first report (van den Akker, Boersma & Nies, 1989) that included a conceptual framework for the studies. Authors like Connelly (1978) and Schaffarzick (1975), discussing the generalization problems of research (usually case studies) on curriculum development strategies, urged the formulation of such a conceptual framework. This framework (specifying activities within several core components of curriculum development like: orientation and foundation; design and construction; evaluation and revision; diffusion and implementation) has guided the data collection and analysis in the case studies. It is also useful in the current efforts to devise and test more effective strategies for components of the development work.

The retrospective case studies

The main question for the retrospective case studies was:

What development strategies have been practised by SLO projects?

From the completed SLO projects a representative sample of 18 projects, spread over different educational sectors and subjects, has been drawn. Each of these projects was studied along the following procedure: (a) Introductory talk with the (former) project director; (b) document analysis (project publications, curriculum products, evaluation reports); (c) individual interviews with the project director and another member of the development team, using an extensive checklist that was based on the conceptual framework; (d) writing of a preliminary case report; (e) comments from the respondents and co-researchers; (f) writing of final case report.

Three separate volumes with case descriptions were produced, while in a single book (van den Akker, Boersma & Nies, 1990) the results of all cases were analyzed. The outcomes have been discussed at a symposium with a large group of SLO developers, leading to recommendations and plans for future training and research activities (Keursten, 1991).

The follow-up studies

Next the emphasis of the research has been shifted from retrospective analysis to the devising of procedures that may guide curriculum developers to (more) effective ways of action. The primary focus is on core tasks like the design, construction, and formative evaluation of curricula. Although interrelated, a distinction is made between the development of different kinds of curriculum products like: documents with attainment targets; curricular frameworks at a national or school level; exemplary instructional materials.

The procedural guidelines are devised on the basis of: reflections on the previous case studies findings; additional and focused literature study; analysis of the approaches in the current development practices; efforts to translate relevant research findings in selected areas. The guidelines are formulated in dialogue between the researchers and several small groups of SLO developers in order to further the relevance, acceptability, and feasibility of the proposals for the curriculum development practitioners. Parts of the guidelines are already tried on a

small scale in several contexts; more systematic testing will start during the year 1992.

The ultimate aspiration of this long term study is to contribute to the formulation of insightful, empirically validated, and practical answers to two central questions proposed by Schaffarzick (1975): (i) What procedures are essential for 'high-quality' curriculum development?, and (ii) What are the most efficient ways to use these procedures?

The different presentations

The first presentation (by *Anca Nies*) will describe the results of the case studies. Patterns of the practised strategies in the different core components of the development activities will be analyzed and illustrated. Also more general perceptions of the (rather informal and not systematic) nature of the development practice will be discussed and confronted with the process-oriented 'quality' criteria for curriculum development as described by authors like Short (1983) and Walker (1979).

In the pursuit of quality improvement the second presentation (by *Kerst Boersma*) will describe the efforts to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of SLO projects through a standardization of the decision making process in the planning and execution of development activities. Guidelines for more systematic project management will be presented, including more specific product requirements and development routes.

The third presentation (by *Gert van den Brink*) will focus on procedural guidelines for the development of attainment targets and their possible meaning for core curricula. These guidelines have a firm base in practical development experiences in recent years in several projects for junior secondary education.

The fourth presentation (by *Jan van den Akker*) will offer procedural guidelines for the development of the curriculum materials for the micro-level of teaching and learning. The proposed approach reflects a kind of developmental research with a lot of attention to formative evaluation activities that anticipate on implementation issues.

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