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## Balancing Curriculum Freedom and Regulation in the Netherlands

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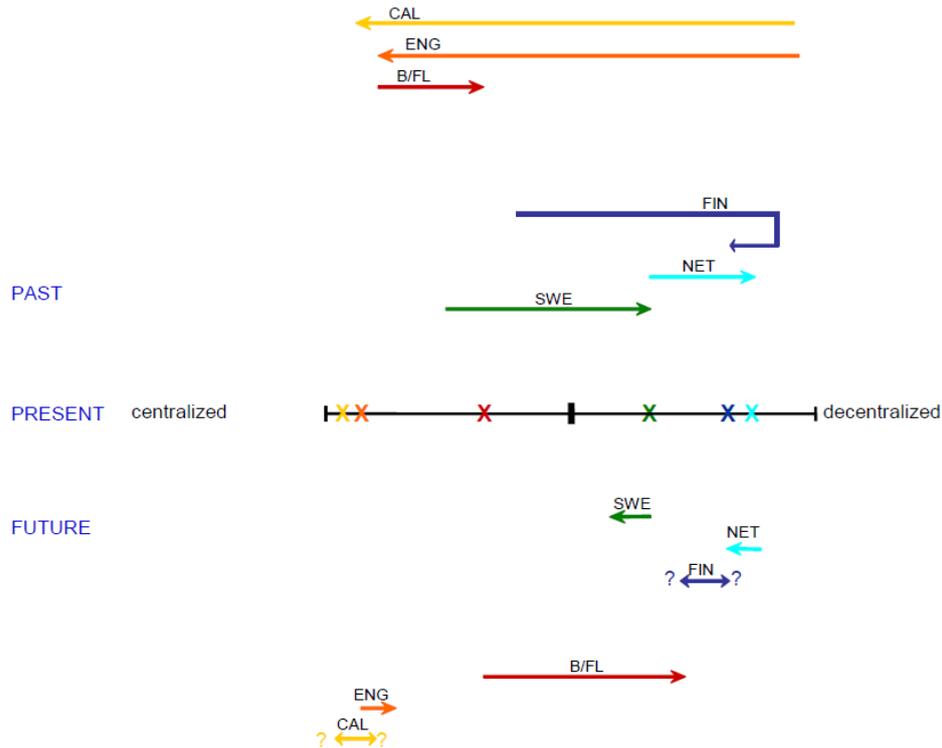
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**ABSTRACT** The extent to which the goals and contents of (compulsory) education should be regulated has been a complicated balancing act in the Netherlands. Against a background of a long-standing statutory tradition of freedom of education, governmental decisions about 'what knowledge is of most worth' have been delicate. The purpose of the analysis described in this article is to disentangle, interpret and discuss this complicated balancing act between curriculum regulation and curriculum freedom during the past 40 years and to learn from other countries by putting the results into a wider European curriculum policy perspective. The contribution will end with discussing issues that need to be carefully considered with respect to the recent Dutch policy shift towards output regulation by means of mandatory achievement tests for mathematics, mother tongue and English at the end of lower secondary education.

### 1. Introduction

Against the background of a long-standing statutory tradition of freedom of education in the Netherlands, governmental decisions about 'what knowledge is of most worth' have been delicate. In this article an attempt is made to disentangle, interpret and discuss this complicated balancing act between curriculum regulation and curriculum freedom and to learn from other countries by putting the results into a wider European curriculum policy perspective. In order to do so, the contribution will commence by positioning policies and practices of Dutch compulsory education in relation to five predominantly European policy contexts. Next, the curriculum steering model will be described that has been used when analysing Dutch curriculum policies during the past 40 years. Using this analysis framework, three major episodes will be described and analysed in more detail. The contribution will conclude with a summary and discussion of the main findings.

As part of an international comparative trend study (Kuiper et al, 2008), school-wide curriculum practices in the compulsory years of schooling were studied in four European countries and in one state in the USA. Each country/state (Belgium/Flanders, England, Finland, Sweden, USA/California, the Netherlands) was positioned on the scale 'centralised-decentralized curriculum policy'. Figure 1 illustrates their then position on the scale as well as the movement of the position in the recent past and the expected direction in the near future. Data cover the years 2004-6 and pertain to three perspectives: policy (analysis of policy documents; interviews with policy makers and curriculum developers), research (literature reviews; interviews with curriculum researchers), and practice (visits to 3-4 schools per case study).



Note: CAL = California; ENG = England; B/FL = Belgium Flanders; FIN = Finland; NET = Netherlands; SWE = Sweden.

Figure 1. Characterisation of curriculum policies in the past, present and future (source: Kuiper et al, 2008).

Figure 1 shows that pendulum swings between government steering and control, on the one hand, and school autonomy, on the other, can be violent. An intriguing issue is why those swings take place. From a cross-case analysis, three main policy arguments could be inferred in support of (moving back a bit in the direction of) central regulation and national prescription:

- *Raising the bar and narrowing the gap for all students.* This equity fostering and quality improvement argument was used in California as well as in England. In California, curriculum policy became very much centralised in the 1990s in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act implemented from 2002 onwards. High-fidelity implementation of standards along with performances of students in the stage of compulsory education in the basics (English, mathematics) were enforced and controlled via state-wide, stringent and regular assessments. As such, California became a typical example of the ‘assessment model of curriculum control’ (Hopmann, 1999). In England, from 1989 onwards a statutory national curriculum was established for all students aged 5-16, in response to the system in place during the 1960s and 1970s when curriculum policy and practices were characterised by substantial autonomy for schools. Most agreed that educational standards were too low and too varied and that some form of direct state intervention was needed to raise the bar and narrow the gaps for all students (Hopkins, 2005). Along with the National Curriculum a statutory programme of age-based achievement testing was also implemented, as well as non-statutory but highly recommended and very influential literacy and numeracy strategies in the Key Stages 1, 2 and 3 for pupils aged 5-7, 7-11 and 11-14 respectively.
- *Provision of more structure, uniformity, and homogeneity.* This was a strong argument heard in Finland against the 1994 national curriculum for basic education (the comprehensive school for children aged 7 to 16). It offered schools such a substantial freedom that they didn’t know how to cope with it. In order to offer more structure and to (re)create more homogeneity, the 1994

version was replaced by a more prescriptive document, i.e. the 2004 national core curriculum for basic education (implemented from 2006 onwards).

- *Regeneration of economic prosperity*. This was an argument brought up, for example, by Goodson (2005) in his analysis of England's policy decision to implement a national curriculum from 1989 onwards. In critically analysing the antecedents of the National Curriculum, he takes the position that the national curriculum debate in England was precipitated by the perception that the nation was threatened by economic decline. Rhetorically then, the National Curriculum was presented as part of the project of economically regenerating 'a nation at risk' or 'as the response of the more economically endangered species' (Goodson, 2005, p. 92).

Main arguments in curriculum policy could also be inferred in support of (moving back a bit in the direction of) deregulation and increased autonomy at the local level:

- *Regulated market competition*, a neo-liberal argument (Delhaxhe, 2006) that implies curricular heterogeneity, autonomy and governance in education. This argument – basically opposite to central regulation aimed at curricular homogeneity – was loudly voiced in Belgium/Flanders (Aelterman, 2005; Standaert, 1998) and the Netherlands.
- *Acknowledgement of teachers' professionalism*, based on the idea that teachers are competent professionals and that curriculum renewal can only be effective and sustainable if teachers feel responsible for it. This is one argument underlying prevalent curriculum policy in the Netherlands.
- *Decrease of education budget at the central level*, which serves as an impetus to pass on tasks and responsibilities (also in financial terms) to the local level. See, for instance, Belgium/Flanders.

Figure 1 illustrates the quite decentralised nature of curriculum policy in the Netherlands in 2004-6, at least in comparison with the other five countries studied. It also makes visible the fact that the pendulum swing in the Netherlands is relatively small over these years and that it was expected to swing slightly towards centralisation. These three findings are the starting point for an updated, in-depth analysis of curriculum policies and practices in the Netherlands presented in this article. In doing so, we use the concept of 'curriculum (de)regulation' rather than 'curriculum (de)centralisation'.

Curriculum (de)regulation may pertain to the *curriculum as a document* and/or to the *process of curriculum implementation*. A curriculum as a document, in particular a curriculum framework at the national level, usually includes descriptions of goals and contents of education and more occasionally elaborations of other curricular components (see the curriculum spider's web metaphor below). When defining the term 'goal' at least three issues need to be taken into account. First of all, a distinction can be made between two types of goals (see also Carlgren, 2006): *goals to strive for*, expressing qualities of knowledge and skills to be developed by teaching and learning processes, and *goals to attain*, expressing what students should know and be able to do after a certain period of schooling. Second, goals and contents make up a kind of a dyad, as, by definition, goals not only reflect knowledge and skills/competences but also the contents to be taught ('to strive for') or to be mastered ('to attain'). And, finally, within the context of this article, the concept 'knowledge' should be taken broadly (Bransford et al, 2000; Van Streun, 2001). It may pertain to knowing of (facts, concepts), knowing how (knowledge exercised in the performance of some task), knowing why (principles, abstractions, overview), and knowing about knowing (metacognitive skills).

'Curriculum regulation' reflects a government's intention to prescribe the high-fidelity implementation of directives at the input level (goals and contents, in terms of 'goals to attain') and at the output level (modes of assessments and examinations). Those prescriptions imply that the room for site-specific curricular choices is restricted. On the other hand, 'curriculum deregulation' reflects a government's intention to refrain from prescription and control at the input and output level by stimulating school-based decision-making 'through soft tools and systems' (see Scholl in this issue). At the heart of curriculum deregulation is the focus on and trust in schools and teachers having the professional freedom to make site-specific interpretations of curriculum guidelines and to lead curriculum renewal (see Hopkins 2005).

Curriculum regulation and curriculum deregulation are the two extremes of a continuum, with a variety of modes of curriculum (de)regulation in between. Key modes can be related to the four political steering models elaborated by Ekholm (1996; Figure 2) in the context of school

improvement. Translated to curriculum (de)regulation, the *implementation* model (I) – in which the government prescribes to schools both the aims and how to reach the aims – can be positioned at the ‘curriculum regulation’ end of the continuum. The *trusting the professionals* model (IV) – in which the government stimulates schools to formulate the aims themselves and also allows schools to find their own solutions on how to reach the aims – can be pictured at the opposite, ‘curriculum deregulation’ end of the continuum. The *gradual development* model (II) as well as the *result-oriented responsibility* model (III), take an in-between position. The result-oriented responsibility model – in which the government prescribes the aims to be achieved by schools and at the same time allows schools to find their own ways to reach the aims – corresponds with what Luhmann (1988) defines as ‘goal programmes’. Such programmes specify goals (desired effects) that should be pursued. These goals can be realised by a variety of means (or implementation processes). The gradual development model – in which schools are allowed to set local aims and the government creates conditions and prescribes the way schools need to go about the improvement process – seems to correspond with the ‘conditional programmes’ defined by Luhmann (1988).

Centre of the system	Prescribes the aims of improvement to the periphery	Stimulates the periphery to formulate the aims of improvement
Prescribes to the periphery how to reach the aims of improvement	IMPLEMENTATION MODEL (I)	GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT (II)
Allows the periphery to find their own solutions on how to reach the aims of improvement	RESULT-ORIENTED RESPONSIBILITY (III)	TRUSTING THE PROFESSIONALS (IV)

Figure 2. Political steering models (source: Ekholm, 1996).

Ekholm’s political steering models can also be related to the four ways of educational change introduced by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) in order to illustrate macro-level policy differences. Each way is known to have its strengths in some areas and limitations in others. The first way, with its bottom-up approach (more or less comparable to Ekholm’s *trusting the professionals* model), embraces the value of professionalism and innovation, but tends to result in inconsistency as well as too much variation in educational quality. The second way, with its top-down approach (Ekholm’s *implementation* model), provides direction and standardisation of curriculum implementation, but usually at great cost of professionalism, motivation and innovation. The third way, with a mixed approach of top-down measures paralleled with extensive bottom-up and lateral support (having some commonalities with Ekholm’s *result-oriented responsibility* model), increases the level of professional energy, but high-stakes testing tends to undermine longer-term, more innovative efforts. The fourth way combines the strengths of the former three ways and abandons the limitations, leading to a framework for change that integrates teacher professionalism, community engagement, government policy, and accountability. Critical in this way is the building of an inspiring and inclusive vision that draws people together in pursuit of an uplifting common purpose.

The focus of this article is an analysis of curriculum policy in the Netherlands. For a proper understanding of the analysis presented here it is important to realise that, contrary to a country like France, in the Netherlands there has been hardly any input and/or output regulation at the national level regarding the goals and contents for primary and secondary education. This curriculum policy tradition has existed for about four hundred years (Van Damme, 2011), with the examination system at the end of upper secondary education (originating from the middle of the nineteenth century) as a striking exception. So, restraint in regulation regarding curriculum issues is deeply rooted in Dutch society. The same is true for school autonomy, formally dating back to a constitution legislated in 1848. Part of this constitution is a prominent article declaring the so-called ‘*freedom of education*’, pertaining to the freedom to found schools, the freedom of school policies, and the freedom of school organisation. This principle of freedom of education provides schools with ample room for site-specific curricular choices. The purpose of the analysis described in this article is to disentangle, interpret and discuss the complicated balancing act (at mainly the macro level) between input and output regulation concerning the goals and contents of (compulsory)

education and the statutory freedom of education during the past 40 years. In our analysis we distinguish three episodes:

- 1970-2000 – slight swing towards input regulation;
- 2000-2007 – deregulation;
- 2007 onwards – slight swing towards output regulation.

In the next sections, each episode will be elaborated, and on this basis we will formulate some recommendations for how to balance regulation and freedom. Before doing so, we will briefly further conceptualise the term ‘curriculum’.

## 2. Brief Conceptualisation of the Term ‘Curriculum’

In our generic definition, a curriculum is ‘a plan for learning’ (Taba, 1962). It refers to the content and purpose of an educational programme together with their organisation (Walker, 1990). Decision-making about planning and learning may occur at various levels (Van den Akker, 2003): system/society/nation/state level (macro); school/institution level (meso); classroom level (micro); and learner level (nano). Also, it may be conceptualised from various angles (Goodlad, 1994): socio-political, technical-professional, and substantive. The socio-political perspective refers to the influence exercised by various stakeholders. The technical-professional perspective is concerned with methods of curriculum development, evaluation and implementation. The substantive perspective refers to the classic curriculum question as to *what is most worth teaching and learning (within an allocated amount of time)*.

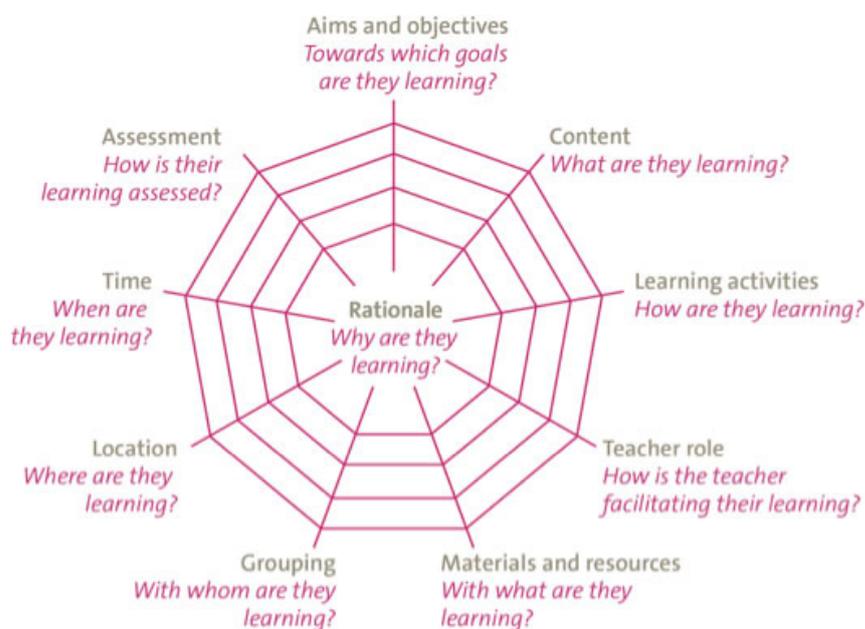


Figure 3. Curriculum spider's web (source: Van den Akker, 2003).

A curriculum may contain statements about all or several of the following components (presented by Van den Akker [2003] as a curriculum spider's web – Figure 3): the rationale underpinning the curriculum; aims, goals and objectives; content; teacher role; learning activities; materials and resources for teaching and learning; grouping; time allocation; and assessment modes and criteria. The spider's web metaphor emphasises both the interconnectedness of the components (including aims and contents) as well as the vulnerability of the structure that connects them. Any dramatic shift will pull the entirety out of balance, with the risk of destroying it altogether. The relevance of the components varies across the curriculum levels. For instance, curriculum documents at the macro level (e.g. a national curriculum) usually focus on the rationale, aims and objectives,

content, and sometimes also time allocation. Curriculum documents at the micro level (e.g. textbooks), on the other hand, usually address all 10 components.

A clarifying distinction concerns the various forms in which curricula can be represented. Although further refinement is possible, the following typology, with three levels and six representations, will normally suffice for clear communication (Table I).

Intended	Ideal Formal/Written	Vision (rationale or basic philosophy underlying a curriculum Intentions as specified in curriculum documents and/or materials)
Implemented	Perceived Operational	Curriculum as interpreted by its users (especially teachers) Actual process of teaching and learning (also: curriculum-in-action)
Attained	Experiential Learned	Learning experiences as perceived by learners Resulting learning outcomes of learners

Table 1. Curriculum representations.

The six representations, built on the work of Goodlad et al (1979; see also Van den Akker, 2003; Thijs & Van den Akker, 2009), are helpful when trying to analyse and understand the often substantial discrepancies or ‘negative coordination’ (Hopmann, 1999) between the different representations or layers of curriculum innovations. Discrepancies may be caused by problems, misunderstandings and challenges related to one or each of the perspectives on curriculum development (socio-political, technical-professional and substantive). The three levels in the typology (intended, implemented and attained) have often been used in international comparative studies that frequently focus on large-scale assessment of attainment levels within the curriculum (TIMSS), and sometimes on the endeavours to relate the effects to the original intentions and to the implementation process.

In the next three sections, the three episodes of the past 40 years of Dutch curriculum policies will be described.

### 3. Episode 1: Slight swing towards input regulation (1970-2000)

During the 1970s and 1980s, the Government pursued a ‘constructive’ education policy, featuring central steering of large-scale innovations. From 1980, the Inspectorate of Education started formulating observation criteria to make objective judgements of the quality of the education process possible. In order to support schools, an extensive school support system was created, including national institutes for educational measurement (CITO) and curriculum development (SLO). The task of SLO was to design and develop exemplary, non-prescriptive ‘models for’ curricula at various levels. The phrasing ‘models for’ was crucial, as – because of the constitutional freedom of education – any appearance of centralised curriculum policy had to be avoided.

Although there was no statutory programme of age-based achievement testing at the end of or during compulsory education, there were influential exit examinations (output regulation) after that period of schooling at age 16 (*vmbo*), age 17 (*havo*) and age 18 (*vwo*), exemplifying Hopmann’s examination model. The goals to be attained and tested in these high-stakes external and internal exit examinations had been laid down in examination programmes (input regulation). Many primary schools started participating in a standardised test that was administered in the final grade of primary education (age 12). This was a non-mandatory but very influential test, developed by CITO and meant to help teachers, students and their parents with choosing the appropriate secondary education track (basically some kind of output regulation).

Nevertheless, the content of education seemed to be fairly stable and was not an object of great dispute. However, from the 1970s to the 1990s the Government’s commitment to the content of education gradually increased – reflecting an inclination to try to regulate a bit more at the input level – in order to stimulate the continuous development of students as well as equity. The lack of clarity about what should be taught in education also became an issue of concern because of the international tendency of developing ‘core curricula’, prompted by the effective school movement (see Brookover & Lezotte, 1977), and reports such as ‘A Nation at Risk’ in the United States

(Mortimore et al, 1988). The Netherlands embarked on this movement, although the process turned out to be extensive and lengthy, leading to first sets of more than 400 attainment targets ('goals to strive for') for primary education as well as for lower secondary education. The parliament did not approve these two sets; the number and detail needed to be revised. Finally, in 1993 much smaller sets – 122 for primary education and about 300 for lower secondary education – of goals 'to strive for' were laid down by law (Letschert, 1998; Thijs et al, 2005). A further review (i.e. reduction and de-specification) took place in 1998.

Parallel to this slight swing towards input regulation, a widespread dissatisfaction was being felt concerning several large-scale curriculum change efforts in secondary education. First of all, a strong and lengthy debate concerning the desirability of a comprehensive school system (eventually) in 1993 led to a political compromise of introducing a core curriculum for the first years of secondary education, but without changing the tracked educational structure. This ambivalence in decision-making negatively affected the chances of the reform's success. In 1998, a curriculum reform was initiated for upper secondary education, containing a new set of aims and contents as well as suggestions (inspired by constructivist approaches) for teaching and learning methods. In practice, the substantive reform (the 'what') led to curriculum overload and fragmentation. The suggestions for the teaching and learning methods suffered from conceptual unclarity and resulted in discontent among teachers concerning the interference of government with classroom pedagogy. This dissatisfaction with large-scale curriculum change efforts led to a greater awareness of the complexities of curriculum change and the processes and time frames that introduce, realise, and sustain such changes at the policy level. In 2007/8, a parliamentary research commission studied these and other large-scale change efforts of this period and concluded that government should not interfere with daily school practices and should leave this to the schools and teachers (Dijsselbloem, 2008).

#### **4. Episode 2: Deregulation (2000-2007)**

Times were changing, to a large extent also due to political changes. Rather than trusting government-initiated large-scale change, the focus shifted towards an emphasis on site-specific commitment and ownership, initially regarding school administrative issues, but increasingly also pertaining to the process and outcomes of education. A strong movement towards autonomy and market forces emerged – not only in education but also in other societal sectors – starting from the assumption that local ownership fosters commitment to curriculum renewal. However, concerning curriculum policy there was still some ambiguity. On the one hand, schools were given ample room to make site-specific choices, which resulted in more variation across schools, especially in lower secondary education. On the other hand, there was still a tendency to safeguard quality by means of (increasing pleas for) standards, the obligation of accountability, as well as external evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education.

Nevertheless, curriculum policy was deregulated. Schools received more space for (re)designing their site-specific curriculum. The attainment targets substantially decreased in number as time went by (for primary education, from 122 in 1993 to 58 since 2005; also, for lower secondary education [ages 13-14] the number of attainment targets decreased to 58). Moreover, they were much less detailed and did not specify any teaching methodologies. They were meant as a source of inspiration for schools and teachers in making site-specific choices as well as a frame of reference for public accountability as regards choices, efforts and outcomes. Schools and teachers were and still are held accountable for the way they give '*freedom within boundaries*' a site-specific interpretation. Deregulation also led to the expectation that schools could evaluate their own educational process. Based on a 2002 Act, the role of the Inspectorate of Education became twofold: (i) inspection to assess the quality of education in terms of the education a school provides as well as its output and to report on it, and (ii) inspection for improvement, by fostering the self-regulative power of a school. A school's self-evaluation report is the starting point for an external quality review by the Inspectorate every four years, as such reflecting an educational governance system (Janssens, 2005). Inspection is proportional to the quality of the education a school provides.

At the school level it should be noted that curriculum deregulation turned out differently among education sectors. Curriculum autonomy in primary and lower secondary education is

greater than in upper secondary education. The freedom for curricular action drastically decreases – or is perceived as drastically decreasing – as high-stakes school-leaving examinations at age 16 (*vmbo*), age 17 (*havo*), and age 18 (*vwo*) come closer. Secondly, several schools for primary and lower secondary education have tried to enact the freedom offered, but by sticking to the textbook much ‘strategic space’ still stays unutilised. In addition, from a monitor study on curriculum (re)design efforts in lower secondary education (Onderbouw-VO, 2005) it appears that schools have taken up the gauntlet, but that there are still large discrepancies between innovation rhetoric and actual functioning of schools, as well as between beliefs and perceptions of school leadership and those of teachers. Thirdly, the 58 attainment targets for lower secondary education have been formulated so broadly that in the opinion of teachers the targets are perceived and used neither as guidance nor as inspirational. Instead, they are used as a control and accountability device afterwards, in the context of external evaluations conducted by the Inspectorate (Nieveen et al, 2011). Fourthly, a generally perceived trend in primary and secondary education is that the national government’s decentralising policy is gradually being counteracted by guidelines provided by the Inspectorate, municipality services, and last but not least, so-called ‘school overarching managers’. The latter especially – appointed by large school boards – appear anxious to play the role of ‘mini ministry’. So, curricular autonomy offered does not necessarily imply that room for site-specific curricular choices is and can be taken up by teachers.

Those schools and teachers that did embark on changing their curriculum were confronted with many common concerns. School-based curriculum development turned out to be a complex endeavour (Nieveen et al, 2010, 2011). Teachers who were used to working by themselves were challenged to share their goals in and perspectives on learning and teaching. Moreover, socio-political concerns also surfaced, including who should be involved in the redesign process and how to activate and include teachers and team leaders. Moreover, teams were confronted with questions on the actual redesign of all interlinked curricular components, such as the selection of learning activities, materials, assessment instruments, acquisition of new teaching roles, and setting out of time frames and equipment in the new learning environment. Teachers reported a lack of confidence in their curriculum design skills, which, in most cases, led to either minimal changes or an unbalanced curriculum with many loose parts. This lack of curriculum competency and the struggle to fully utilise curricular freedom was also found in a survey of a representative sample of teachers in junior secondary education (Onderbouw-VO, 2008).

### **5. Episode 3: Slight swing towards output regulation (2007 onwards)**

Recently, the pendulum has been slightly swinging again, influenced by alterations in the political climate due to a change of government in 2010 and the rhetoric at the policy level of striving for a top five position in the rankings based on international comparative studies like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Although commitment from schools and teachers has proven to be conducive to the effectiveness and sustainability of improvement and renewal efforts, school autonomy also appears to have its limits – like tight government steering has. There are considerable challenges of major public importance and beyond individual schools (e.g. careful decision-making about the curriculum classic of what should be learned) that call for a combining of forces and a regulating role from 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.

The solution to many of the issues is now being pursued through a more detailed specification of education outcomes: thus, input regulation. The Education Council – the most authoritative counselling body as regards education policy in the Netherlands – made a plea for the formulation of standards (minimum achievements required), to be implemented in Year 4 (age 8, the middle of primary education), Year 8 (age 12, end of primary education) and Year 10 (lower secondary education). The Council considered those standards – strikingly resembling Finland’s implemented ‘descriptions of good performance’ – as a proper device for providing schools and teachers with operational instructional objectives in order to counteract the underperformance of students, in particular with regard to Dutch language and mathematics (‘the basics’). On more or

less the same line of reasoning the Ministry of Education commissioned the development of a reference framework for Dutch literacy and mathematics. This framework (formally legislated in 2010) consists of standards ranging from Years 4, 8 and 10 to the final years of junior general vocational education, senior general education and pre-university education. As operationalisations of the current attainment targets (for primary and lower secondary education) and the prevailing exit examination programmes (at the end of secondary education) they are meant as a guiding frame of reference and entrance requirements for subsequent education programmes.

In recent ministerial policy agendas, stronger guidance is expected from outcomes-based education, along with an obligatory final test at the end of primary education and a mandatory diagnostic test for Dutch language, mathematics and English at the end of lower secondary education. So, here output regulation enters the scene. Also, initiatives to study the added value of schools to learning growth in (especially) the basics are in line with a move towards output regulation. Based on a new Act in 2012, the Inspectorate is concentrating its efforts on those schools that show insufficient quality, and can get the mandate of the Ministry of Education to impose penalties. Still starting from the assumption that local ownership fosters commitment to curriculum renewal, the support infrastructure is becoming increasingly market-driven. Schools are being lump sum financed for the support and professional development they need in order to keep up their performance results.

## **6. Discussion: performing a balancing act**

The analysis shows, in retrospect, that regulating goals and contents of (compulsory) education has been – and still is – a balancing act in the Netherlands taking place on *the right half of the continuum* of the scale pictured in Figure 1. Against a background of a long-standing statutory tradition of freedom of education with a strong trust in the teachers as professionals (e.g. Ekholm, 1996), governmental decisions about ‘what knowledge is of most worth’ have been delicate. Although for about two hundred years output regulation has been in place for upper secondary education by means of high-stakes exit examinations, the Dutch Government has left the answer to the key curricular question (of what knowledge is of most worth) largely open-ended.

From the 1970s onward, influenced by the international school effectiveness movement and optimism about bringing about social change through large-scale educational changes, the then Dutch Government started the debate on input regulation. This shift towards a results-oriented steering model (see Ekholm, 1996) can be found, for instance, in the development of attainment targets that primary and lower secondary education should strive for.

However, at the start of the new millennium, due to a change to a government aiming at deregulation and market forces, the focus shifted towards site-specific commitment and ownership. This led to an unambiguous reduction in the number and detail of attainment targets, implicating less input steering. Based on this renewed trust in teachers as professionals (see Ekholm, 1996), schools and teachers were expected to make their own site-specific curricular choices. In many cases this resulted in innovative school profiles, but also into concerns with the complexities that school-based curriculum renewal brings about.

From 2007 onward, again also due to international-related forces (such as PISA and TIMSS ranking lists) and a change of government, a shift towards a results-oriented steering model becomes visible (see Ekholm, 1996). Input regulation has been revitalised by converting the attainment targets (‘goals to strive for’) for Dutch literacy and mathematics into standards (‘goals to attain’). Moreover, for the first time in Dutch history, educational policy is favouring output regulation for primary education and lower secondary education by means of mandatory achievement tests for mother tongue and mathematics at the end of primary education and for mother tongue, mathematics and English at the end of lower secondary education, to be implemented from 2014 and with a diagnostic purpose as regards lower secondary education.

The Dutch situation shows the difficulty in striking a good balance between school autonomy (freedom) and regulations (boundaries). Both prescriptive and flexible models have their pros and cons (Hargreaves, 2003; Fullan, 2008). In short, the dilemma is that models with prescriptive regulations obtain better short-term results but do not last, while flexible models with more freedom for schools and teachers seem to last longer but often lack focus (Fullan, 2008). Flexible

models last longer because, as exemplified by the provision of curricular space, at their heart is trust in schools and teachers leading the curriculum renewal (Hopkins, 2005). The latter is generally perceived as a prerequisite for securing sustainable change (Hargreaves, 2003; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The recent Dutch policy shift towards output regulation by means of mandatory achievement tests brings about some key issues that need to be carefully considered. First of all, the rationale behind the formulation of standards in terms of 'descriptions of good performance' (cf. Finland) may provide teachers with more operational support and might help to counteract the underperformance of students (up to a certain level), also acknowledged by Scholl in this issue. However, at the same time it bears the risk of preserving 'the old school' (Carlgren, 2006) and opening the door to all the negatives of rigid assessment arrangements. In order to avoid this risk, Carlgren speaks of 'goals to attain while striving', emphasising that 'goals to attain' are subordinated to 'goals to strive for'. This goal model has been implemented in Sweden, as part of the 1994 national curriculum for the comprehensive school. Other examples are the general part of the Norwegian 1997 curriculum and the Illinois reform effort from the 1990s. To stay away from curriculum deadening (Herman, 2006) – the excessive focus on test scores for the basics to the neglect of other subjects – learning trajectories preferably should pertain to a wide range of subjects rather than only to literacy and mathematics and should also value cross-curricular skills (see, for instance, Brinkley et al, 2010).

Second, output regulation (framing the 'back door' of education) should not go without a proper democratic debate about what needs to be tested (framing the 'front door'). In other words, the question of 'what knowledge is of most worth teaching and learning' needs to be addressed first. This does not necessarily mean that all decisions about goals and contents ('front door') must have been made before decisions about assessment tasks and arrangements ('back door') can be taken. Backward design, in terms of the construction of assessment tasks, may be a useful means for operationalising and hence defining intended learning outcomes.

Third, as it discourages professional activity on the part of teachers (Kelly, 2004), it does not make sense to implement a major swing towards strongly regulating teachers' work via detailed standards along with stringent achievement testing. The major strengths of the curriculum policy period between 2000 and 2007 – fostering bottom-up renewal initiatives and appealing to teachers to their professional capacity – should not be discarded. Schools and teachers in the Netherlands are not looking for overly prescriptive frameworks. Rather, they would be inspired by promising and prototypical practical examples of how to (re)design their site-specific school curriculum in the context of the attainment targets (see also Standaert, 1998). For instance, procedurally and substantively specified educative materials that illustrate and support the essentials of the curriculum reform and that are adjustable to the local aims of the school will be more inspiring and of more support for schools and teachers than a detailed set of standards with accompanying achievement tests. At the same time, it should be noted that important lessons can be learned from experiences in some other European countries: *some* specification may provide teachers with the hold and support they say they need (see Finland), while *over*-specification may be perceived as a prescriptive straitjacket that works counterproductively (see England).

Future educational change efforts in Europe – including efforts at the policy level, initiatives at the school level and support from lateral partners on the side (such as support agencies, textbook publishers, test developers, inspectorate, school networks) – would benefit from a common inspiring and inclusive vision that draws people together in their efforts of uplifting common purpose. To follow up on this critical element (put forward by Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009), the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) is taking initiatives to assist professional and public debates in order to foster an inspirational common sense of direction as regards the goals and contents of compulsory education. In doing so, important lessons can be learned from, and may be contributed to, more or less comparable curriculum initiatives in other (European) countries.

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