

Curriculum regulation and freedom in the Netherlands - A puzzling paradox

Wilma Kuiper (SLO/Utrecht University), Nienke Nieveen (SLO), & Jan Berkvens (SLO)

Abstract

The extent to which the goals and contents of education should to be regulated has been a complicated balancing act in the Netherlands over the years. Against a backdrop of a long-standing statutory tradition of freedom of education, governmental decisions about 'what knowledge is of most worth' have been delicate. In this chapter an attempt is made to disentangle, interpret and discuss this complicated balancing act between curriculum regulation and curriculum freedom. First the terms 'curriculum', 'curriculum regulation' and 'curriculum deregulation' are briefly conceptualized. Based on these conceptualizations, curriculum policy and practices in the Netherlands during the past 40 years are described and discussed. In doing so, we distinguish three major episodes.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, as part of a policy emphasizing more outcomes-based education, there is an increased focus on basic student knowledge and skills in reading and writing, and in arithmetic and mathematics. Expectations are that also English will acquire this status. This policy emphasis seems to reflect the 'global education reform movement' [GERM] (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Sahlberg, 2011), with a strong focus on literacy and numeracy as one of the common features. However, there is more than 'the basics' to put on the stage as an answer to the classical curriculum question as to *what is of most worth*

teaching and learning in education (within an allocated amount of time). Claims on aims are also, continuously and often on an ad-hoc basis, made by a rich variety of stakeholders with regard to other subjects (like science subjects, social science subjects, physical education, arts), cross-curricular themes and societal issues (like environmental education, health education, financial education, over-weight, and bullying), and cross-curricular competencies reflected in 21st century skills (including, for instance, digital literacy). All these claims often result into (a feeling of) overloaded curricula. Careful deliberation and decision-making on what and why to prioritize and what and why to leave out the curriculum are of major importance.

In dealing with these processes as well as their results - in terms of, for instance, a national curriculum framework - also other curriculum questions are at stake. These include the following: To what extent and how to regulate from a national level what should be learned and/or taught and to what extent and how to monitor what has been taught and learned? But also to what extent local curricular decision-making should be allowed and school-based curriculum development could be supported? What roles, when, how, and by which players to fulfil when developing, reviewing, implementing, and monitoring a national curriculum framework? And, last but not least, how to organize debate and decision-making about what is of most worth teaching and learning?

In the Netherlands, there has been hardly any regulation at the national level regarding the goals and contents for primary and secondary education for about 400 years (van Damme, 2011). The only exception is the examination system at the end of upper secondary education (which originates from the middle of the 19th century). Not only restraint in curriculum regulation is deeply rooted in Dutch society. The same is true for school autonomy, which formally dates 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 organization. This principle of freedom of education provides schools with ample room for site-specific curricular choices.

In this chapter an attempt is made to disentangle, interpret and discuss the complicated balancing act between curriculum regulation and curriculum freedom in the Netherlands. In order to do so, we first give a brief conceptualization of the terms ‘curriculum’, ‘curriculum regulation’ and ‘curriculum deregulation’. Based on these conceptualizations we next analyze and discuss curriculum policies in the Netherlands during the past 40 years. In doing so, we distinguish three major episodes.

2. Curriculum, curriculum regulation, and curriculum deregulation

2.1 Curriculum

In our generic definition, a curriculum is ‘a plan for learning’ (Taba, 1962). It refers to the content and purpose of an educational program together with their organization (Walker, 1990). Decision-making about planning and learning may occur at various levels (van den Akker, 2003): system, society, nation or state level (macro); school or institution level (meso); classroom level (micro); and learner level (nano). Also, it may be conceptualized 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 design, evaluation, and implementation. The substantive perspective refers to the already mentioned question as to what is of most worth teaching and learning.

A curriculum may contain statements about all or several of the following components (presented by van den Akker (2003) as a curricular spider’s web, figure 1): 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 emphasizes 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 framework) 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 ten components.

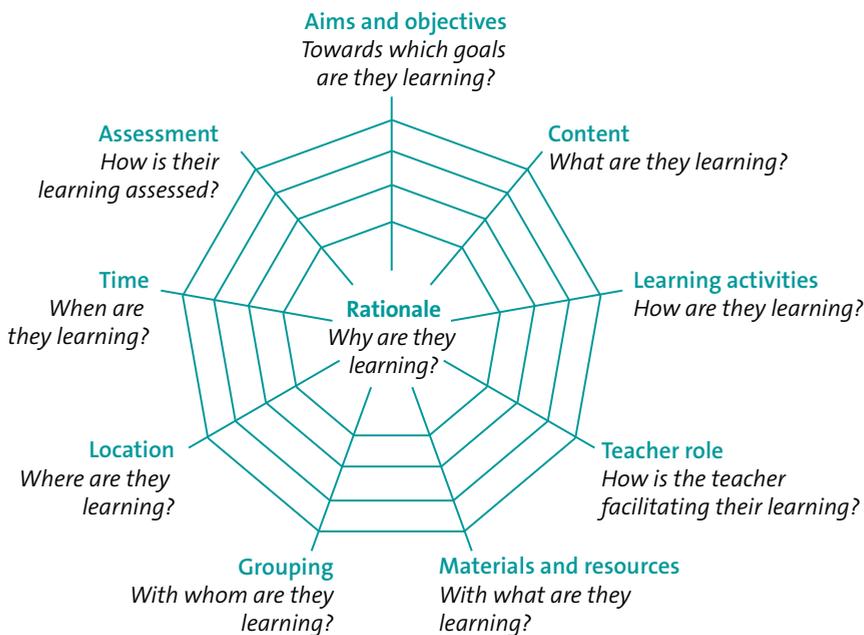


Figure 1: Curricular spider's web

A clarifying distinction concerns the various forms in which curricula can be represented. The typology presented in figure 2 builds on the work of Goodlad, Klein, and Tye (1979; see also van den Akker, 2003; Thijs & van den Akker, 2009; Kuiper, Folmer, & Ottevanger, 2013) and is 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). For instance, one of those discrepancies may be a lack of alignment between goals and contents described in a national curriculum framework (formal curriculum) and the content and format of tests and examinations linked with the curriculum framework (assessed curriculum).

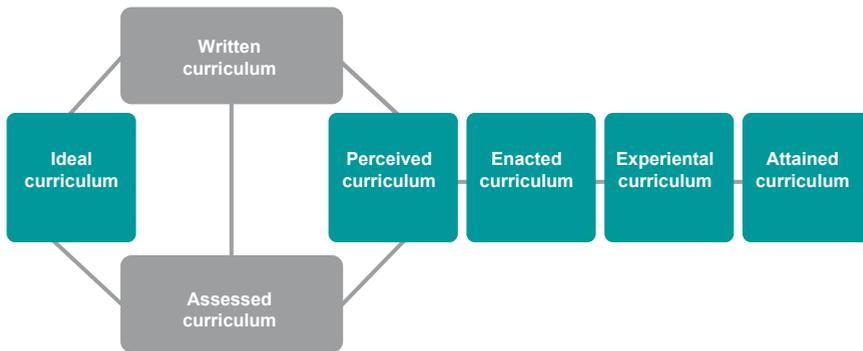


Figure 2: Curriculum representations

2.2 Curriculum regulation and deregulation

Curriculum regulation and *curriculum deregulation* may pertain to the curriculum both as a document and 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 often elaborations of other curricular components (see the curriculum spider’s web metaphor). 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 (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’). Third, within the context of this contribution, the concept ‘knowledge’ should be taken broadly (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 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 input level (goals and contents, in terms of ‘goals to attain’ or ‘goals to strive for’) and at output level (modes of

assessments and examinations; surveillance by the inspection; governance). Those prescriptions imply that the room for site-specific curricular choices is restricted. *Curriculum deregulation* reflects a government's intention to refrain from prescription and control at input and output level by stimulating school-based decision-making. At the heart of curriculum deregulation is trust in schools and teachers having the professional freedom to make site-specific interpretations of curriculum guidelines (Hopkins, 2005).

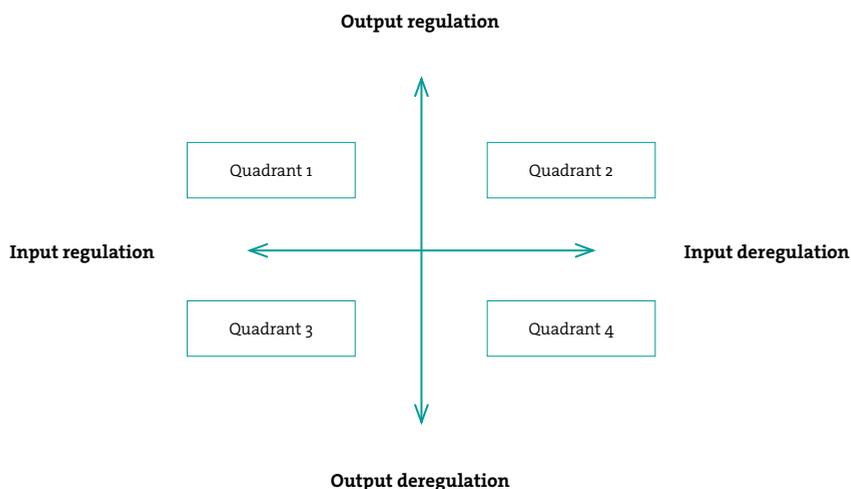


Figure 3: Input and output (de)regulation (building on Leat, Livingston & Priestley, see chapter 11 in this volume; Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012)

Curriculum regulation and curriculum deregulation at both the input and the output level can be conceived as extremes on a continuum, with a variety of modes of in-between. When we cross the continuums for input regulation/deregulation and output regulation/deregulation into one model, it becomes possible to position curriculum policies in countries in the four quadrants (Figure 3; building on Leat, Livingston, & Priestley, 2013). Curriculum policies in the top-left quadrant 'input and output regulation' can be designated as centralized, those in the bottom-right quadrant 'input and output deregulation' as decentralized. GERM-oriented policies - with standardizing teaching and learning, focus on literacy and numeracy, teaching a prescribed curriculum,

test-based accountability and control, and borrowing market-oriented reform ideas (Sahlberg, 2011) - typically can be positioned in the top-left quadrant. The position of countries can, of course, change over time.

Curriculum regulation (prescription and control) and deregulation (freedom) are not just a matter of a forced choice between two alternatives. Rather than as a dilemma, they should be taken as 'paradoxical perspectives' which both exist. The challenge is to find a proper balance in this puzzling "*paradox between steering and autonomy*" (Heijmans, 2013, p. 223): Too much steering - in our terminology 'regulation' - does not create ownership or professional ownership by teachers. Too little regulation provides insufficient sense of direction or results. Only trust in teachers and teachers' professionalism does guarantee improved educational quality. Insufficient space for site-specific choices undermines teachers' professionalism and negatively affects the imago of the teacher's profession.

2.3 Curriculum steering models

Key modes of curriculum regulation and deregulation can also be related to the four political steering models elaborated by Ekholm (1996) in the context of school improvement. The model (table 1) departs from the notion that systems not only regulate or deregulate the aims and goals of education and educational improvement (i.e. the 'what'), but also how to reach those aims and goals (i.e. the process of how to get there). Translated in curriculum (de) regulation terms, the *implementation* model (I) - in which the government prescribes both the aims and how to reach the aims - can be characterized as 'curriculum regulation' (at the input and/or output level). The *trusting the professionals* model (IV) - in which the government stimulates schools to formulate the aims themselves and also allows schools to find local solutions on how to reach the aims - can be pictured as 'curriculum deregulation'. The *gradual development* model (II) - 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 - takes an in-between position. The same is true for the *result-oriented responsibility* model (III) - in which the government prescribes the aims to be achieved by schools and at the same time allows schools to find their own ways in reaching the aims.

Table 1: Political steering models (source: Ekholm, 1996)

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)

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 with 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 standardization 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. The building of an inspiring and inclusive vision that draws people together in pursuit of an uplifting common purpose is critical to this approach.

3. Curriculum policy and practices in three episodes

The purpose of the analysis below is to disentangle, interpret and discuss the complicated balancing act (mainly at macro level) between input and output

regulation concerning the goals and contents of education and the statutory freedom of education in the Netherlands during the past 40 years. The analysis focuses on compulsory education (comprising primary and junior secondary education, for children aged 5-16) as well as on senior secondary education. In secondary education – like in most countries comprising a junior level and a senior level - students may follow roughly one of three ability tracks: vocational (vmbo, four years, ages 12-16), general secondary (havo, five years, ages 12-17), and academic (vwo, six years, ages 12-18). In our analysis three episodes are distinguished.

3.1 Episode 1: 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 judgments 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. The phrasing ‘models for’ was crucial, as any appearance of centralized curriculum policy had to be avoided against the backdrop of the constitutional freedom of education.

Although there was no statutory program 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). The goals to be attained and tested in these high-stakes external and internal exit examinations were laid down in examination programs (input regulation). The goals meant to be assessed by means of the external examinations were further specified in rather detailed, quite influential syllabi. Many primary schools started participating in a standardized 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).

Especially the content of primary and junior secondary education ('basic 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 regulate a bit more at the input level – in order to stimulate equity and the continuous development of students. 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 (Brookover & Lezotte, 1977), and reports such as 'A Nation at Risk' in the United States (Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, & Ecob, 1988). The Netherlands embarked on this movement, although the process turned out to be extensive and lengthy, leading to initial sets of more than 400 attainment targets ('goals to strive for') for primary education, as well as for junior secondary education. The Dutch parliament did not approve these two sets; the number and detail had to be revised. Finally, in 1993 much smaller sets – 122 for primary education and about 300 for junior secondary education – of goals 'to strive for' were laid down by law (Letschert, 1998; Thijs, Letschert, & Paus, 2005). A further review - i.e. reduction and de-specification - took place in 1998.

Parallel to this slight swing towards input regulation regarding compulsory education, 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 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 had a negative effect on the success of the reform. In 1998, a curriculum reform was initiated for senior 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 lack of conceptual clarity 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, realize, and sustain such changes at the policy level. In 2007-2008, a parliamentary research commission studied these and other recent large-scale educational change efforts and concluded that government should not interfere with daily school practices and should leave this to the schools and teachers (Dijsselbloem, 2008).

In sum, curriculum policy in this episode positioned in the input/output regulation model (Figure 3):

- Primary education and junior secondary education: *slight swing towards input regulation*; mild output regulation by means of surveillance (Quadrant 4, slightly moving towards Quadrant 3).
- Senior secondary education: *input regulated* by means of subject-specific examination programs and syllabi further specifying goals assessed in external exit examinations; *output regulation* by means of subject-specific external and internal exit examinations (Quadrant 1).

3.2 Episode 2: 2000-2007

Educational times were changing, to a large extent also due to political changes. Rather than trusting government-initiated large-scale educational change, the focus in primary and junior secondary education 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 ambiguity. On the one hand, schools were given ample room to make site-specific choices, which resulted in more variation across schools, especially in junior secondary education. On the other hand, there was still a tendency to safeguard quality by means of standards, the obligation of accountability, and external evaluation by the Inspectorate of Education.

Nevertheless, curriculum policy was deregulated in primary and junior secondary education. Schools received more space for (re)designing their site-specific curriculum. They tried to enact the freedom offered, but by sticking to the textbook much 'strategic space' stayed - and still stays - unutilized. The attainment targets substantially decreased in number as time went by (for primary education, from 122 in 1993 to 58 since 2005; also, for junior secondary education the number decreased to 58). Moreover, they were much less specific and did not include 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 regard to choices, efforts and outcomes. However, the 58 attainment targets had been (and still are) formulated in such a broad way that in the opinion of teachers the targets were (and still are) perceived and used neither as a guiding nor as inspirational. Instead, they were and are in the end used as a control and accountability device, during the context of external evaluations conducted by the Inspectorate (Nieveen, Handelzalts, & van Eekelen, 2011). Schools and teachers were and still are held indeed accountable for the way they give 'freedom within boundaries' a site-specific interpretation.

Deregulation 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.

A generally perceived trend in primary and secondary schools was that the national government's decentralizing policy was (and still 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 - appeared 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 indeed 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 endeavor (Nieveen, Handelzalts, & van Eekelen, 2011; Nieveen, van den Akker, & Resink, 2010). 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 new learning environments. 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 utilize curricular freedom was also found in a survey of a representative sample of teachers in junior secondary education (Onderbouw-VO, 2008).

During this episode curriculum autonomy in primary and junior secondary education was (and still is) much greater than in senior secondary education. As already noted in the introduction section, the freedom for curricular action drastically decreased - or was perceived as drastically decreasing - as high-stakes exit examinations taken at the end of senior secondary education came closer. In this episode, policies and practices regarding examination programs and syllabi remained largely unchanged.

In sum, curriculum policy in this episode in the input/output regulation model presented in Figure 3:

- Primary education and junior secondary education: *more input deregulation* by means of de-specified attainment targets; at the same time *more output regulation* by means of surveillance and governance (move back towards Quadrant 4).

- Senior secondary education: no change; *input regulated* by means of subject-specific examination programs and syllabi further specifying goals assessed in external exit examinations; *output regulated* by means of subject-specific external and internal exit examinations (Quadrant 1).

3.3 Episode 3: from 2007 onwards

Recently, in primary and junior secondary education the pendulum has started moving again, due to a mix of influences: alterations in the political climate because of a change of government in 2010 and the rhetoric at the policy level on striving for a top five ranking in international comparative studies (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS). 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 regulation 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 and taught) that call for combining 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 in primary and junior secondary education in this episode is being pursued through a more detailed specification of education outcomes in the context of a policy emphasizing outcomes-based education. In 2000, the Education Council - the most authoritative counseling body regarding education policy in the Netherlands - made a plea for the formulation of standards (minimum achievements). These standards should be implemented in Year 4 (age 8, primary education), Year 8 (age 12, end of primary education) and Year 10/Secondary 2 (age 14, junior secondary education). The Council considered those standards - 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 literacy and numeracy (that were considered 'the basics'). Following

a more or less same line of reasoning, the Ministry of Education commissioned the development of a curriculum framework for literacy and mathematics. This framework has been implemented since 2010 and 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 operationalization of the current attainment targets (for primary and lower secondary education) and the prevailing examination programs (at the end of senior secondary education) they are meant as a guiding frame of reference and entrance requirements for subsequent education programs. The implementation of these standards witnesses a clear policy move towards (GERM-inspired) input regulation for the basics.

But this is only part of the story. The policy emphasis on outcomes-based education - comparable, for instance, with the Knowledge Promotion initiative implemented in Norway since 2006 - also finds its expression, even first and foremost, in an increased importance of being attached to testing and test-based accountability and control. A mandatory test at the end of primary education is going to be implemented, as it seems now, from 2015 onwards. Mandatory diagnostic tests for literacy, numeracy and English are expected to be administered in Year 10/Secondary 2, very likely also from 2015 onwards. It is safe to conclude that GERM-based output regulation, in addition to more input regulation, prominently has entered the scene as regards the basics (and probably English) in the compulsory age of schooling. 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 from 2012, the Inspectorate is concentrating its efforts on those schools that show insufficient quality, and could receive penalties from the Ministry of Education. 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.

From 2007 onwards, modified subject-specific examination programs have been implemented in senior secondary education. The changes include a considerable de-specification of goals, meant to provide schools with more freedom to make choices about how to reach those goals. This modest but historically rather striking swing towards input deregulation seems to have the intended effect regarding the internal exit examinations schools themselves are responsible for to organize, develop and administer. However, due to the fact that the level of specification given in syllabi remained unchanged, school practices pertaining to prepare students for external exit examinations do not seem to have changed substantially.

In sum, curriculum policy in this episode positioned in the input/output regulation model (Figure 3):

- Primary education and junior secondary education: *swing towards more output and input regulation* as regards literacy, numeracy (and English) in the compulsory age of schooling (partial move into direction of Quadrant 1).
- Senior secondary education: more *input deregulation* by means of de-specification of subject-specific examination programs; un-changed *output regulation* by means of subject-specific external and internal exit examinations (Quadrant 1).

4. Discussion

4.1 *Puzzling paradoxical perspectives*

The analysis above shows that regulating goals and contents of education in the Netherlands has been - and still is - a balancing act. Against the backdrop of a long-standing statutory tradition of freedom of education with a strong trust in teachers as professionals (Ekholm, 1996), governmental decisions about 'what knowledge is of most worth' not only teaching and learning but also testing have been delicate. Although for about 200 years input regulation (in the form of syllabi and subject-specific examination programs) and output regulation (in the form of external and internal school-leaving examinations) have been in place in senior secondary education, the Dutch Government has left curriculum decisions regarding primary and junior secondary education largely open-ended for a long time.

From the 1970s onward, influenced by the international school effectiveness movement and optimism about bringing about social change through large-scale educational change, the Dutch Government started the debate on input regulation for compulsory education. This shift to some degree towards a results-oriented steering model (Ekholm, 1996) is visible in the development of attainment targets that teachers in primary and junior secondary education should strive for. However, at the start of the new millennium, due to a change of government aiming at deregulation and market competition, the focus shifted slightly towards site-specific commitment and ownership. This led to a substantial reduction in the number as well as a de-specification of attainment targets, implicating less input regulation. Schools and teachers were expected to make their own site-specific curricular choices. In many cases this resulted in innovative school profiles and practices, but also in concerns with the complexities that school-based curriculum renewal brings about. At the same time, there was an increased focus on output regulation by means of surveillance by the Inspectorate and governance. From 2007 onwards, due to PISA and TIMSS rankings along with a change of government, a shift back towards a results-oriented steering model becomes visible. As regards compulsory education, input regulation has been revitalized by converting the attainment targets ('goals to strive for') for literacy and numeracy into standards ('goals to attain'), legislated in a prescriptive curriculum framework that also pertains to senior secondary education. Moreover, for the first time in Dutch history, educational policy is explicitly favoring output regulation for primary education and junior secondary education by means of mandatory achievement tests for literacy and numeracy at the end of primary education and for mother tongue, mathematics and English at the end of lower secondary education. The latter are very likely to be implemented from 2015 onwards and are intended to have a diagnostic purpose. In senior secondary education, de-specified examination programs have been implemented since 2007 - implying some input deregulation. However, because the level of specification in syllabi remained unchanged and de facto 'compensated' for the de-specification in the examination programs, this policy change hardly affected school and classroom practices.

The slight, but in some respect remarkable, pendulum swings (that even differ across education sectors) demonstrate the difficulty in striking a good balance between the two perspectives of curriculum regulation (prescription, testing, surveillance) and curriculum deregulation (freedom for site-specific choices). In this respect, these two curriculum policy modes should indeed not be seen as stances one can choose from. The analysis so far shows that both perspectives - to some degree - are needed to be considered in order to come to successful educational change. The issue to be raised is how to balance both perspectives. Reflecting on these paradoxical notions of regulation and deregulation a number of comments can be made. In doing so, we use the metaphor of education as a building with a front and a back door.

4.2 *A common, comprehensive and cohesive curriculum framework*

Nowadays at the front door (input) there is a mixture of common attainment targets ('goals to strive for') covering the whole range of subject domains and also common standards ('goals to attain') for literacy and numeracy. At the back door (output) there is surveillance by the inspectorate - with a strong focus on student outcomes, especially for the basics - and a growing interest in testing. And, by tradition, there is a predominance of textbook use by teachers. However, at the front door of the building there is *not* - like there is, for example, in Finland (National Core Curriculum for Basic Education), Scotland (Curriculum for Excellence), Norway (National Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion), New Zealand (The New Zealand Curriculum) and Australia - *one* curriculum framework that provides a *common, comprehensive and cohesive* answer to the question of what is of most worth learning and teaching in this education sector. Such a curriculum framework might be useful and effective, for at least three reasons:

- It could give more, a more common as well as a better defined sense of direction (cf. Miller & Osborne, 1998) about what the goals and contents 'of most worth' to teach and learn are.
- It could not only give more and a more common sense of purpose as to what to teach and learn, but also to what to assess. During the third episode we noticed an increased, GERM-inspired significance being attached to testing and test-based accountability and surveillance. This

‘framing the back door’ of the education building by means of more output regulation should not go without *first* ‘framing the front door’ through debate and decision-making on the goals and contents to be realized and assessed. Framing the front door *first* - with maximum involvement and commitment from stakeholders - paves the way for democratic, transparent, balanced, coherent and sustainable decision-making about goals and contents considered to be *relevant* teaching and learning (see first bullet) as well as assessing. So, ‘framing the front door’ is a prerequisite for ‘framing the back door’, and not the other way around. If agreement on and clarity about the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of education are missing at the front, then tests and surveillances alter into a sort of hidden curriculum at the back (see also Figure 2).

- The provision of sense of purpose about the ‘what’ could stimulate schools and teachers to take advantage of better use of the space offered for their own curricular choices, in particular regarding ‘how’ to realize the ‘what’. To put the latter differently: offering room for site-specific curricular choices - and ambitions - should go with a clear, common, comprehensive and cohesive framework that provides specifics concerning goals and contents that are considered relevant. So, freedom going along with specification. In addition, an answer shared by relevant stakeholders to the question posed may also help to put the current policy focus on the basics into a broader perspective. That is to say, there is a broadly shared recognition of the major importance of mastering the basics, but at the same time there is a growing discomfort about the perceived partial focus on the basics. There is more worth teaching and learning within the allocated amount of time than literacy and numeracy.

4.3 *Inspirational support by specification and exemplification*

The noun ‘*framework*’ and adjective ‘*common*’ should not be identified with ‘*prescription*’. Rather than prescribing what the goals and contents of basic education are, a common, comprehensive and cohesive curriculum framework for basic education should aim at providing *specification and operational support*. By doing so, it should give inspiration and a sense of direction to schools, teachers, textbook publishers, and the like. Schools and teachers in the

Netherlands are not looking for an overly prescriptive curriculum framework. Rather, they would like to be inspired and at the same time be supported by more specification (which the current attainment targets do not deliver). In addition to such a curriculum framework, support also can be provided by promising and prototypical practical *exemplifications* of how to (re)design the site-specific school curriculum in the context of a future curriculum framework. Examples may take the shape of educative materials that illustrate and support the essentials of the curriculum and that are adjustable to the local aims of the school. The major strengths of the curriculum policy period between 2000 and 2007 should not be discarded, as they were fostering bottom-up renewal initiatives, appealing to teachers to their professional capacity and stimulating what is nowadays called ‘teacher agency’ (Priestley & Biesta, 2013).

However, providing *support by specification and exemplification* is like balancing on a thin rope. At least two risks or a combination of the two may be lurking:

- Unintentionally, it may be perceived by teachers and others as only having to teach a prescribed curriculum and as mistrust in teachers’ professionalism. 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 for example Finland), while over-specification may be perceived as a prescriptive straitjacket that works counterproductively (see England).
- Specification may incite more testing and test-based accountability and control, in particular testing and controlling of those aspects that can be specified and can be measured in a more reliable way (and at the expense of aspects that are harder to specify but are also relevant to be taught and learned and valid to be assessed).

4.4 *Space offered versus space taken*

Curriculum deregulation means that there is space for site-specific curricular choices. Space is offered from the top and can (or is meant to) be taken bottom-up. So, it takes two to tango. However, offering space does not imply

that the space will be experienced as such neither that the space also will be taken by schools and teachers. The latter may be due to teachers lacking the competences to cope with the freedom as they develop the curriculum. The former is (also) affected by teachers' inclination to stick to the textbook. The point here is that, by heavily relying on textbooks, teachers themselves restrict much of the strategic space they have available. So, unintentionally, textbooks have quite an input-regulative effect on teaching practices and, as such, represent quite a peculiar sort of 'self-imposed prescription' (see also Leat, Livingston, & Priestly, elsewhere in this Yearbook).

4.5 Communicating vessels

In this chapter curriculum regulation and curriculum deregulation at both the input and output level have been conceived as puzzling 'paradoxical perspectives'. Our analysis of curriculum policies during the past forty years in the Netherlands makes clear that both perspectives exist in a paradoxical and also continuously changing relation to each other. It appears indeed to be a matter of 'and - and', not 'either - or'. We may even go one step further by taking curriculum regulation and curriculum deregulation as communicating vessels. In physical terms this principle means that increasing the fluid level in one vessel automatically results in a decrease of the fluid level in the other. When we apply this physical principle to the concept of curriculum (de)regulation, it means that more input (de)regulation implies - or let us say 'might imply' - less output (de)regulation. So, in case there will be a common, comprehensive and cohesive curriculum framework that expresses the broadly shared 'will of the what and the why of education', less output regulation will do. The experiences in Finland - top-performing in PISA, having a core curriculum that is an expression of their will, but not having testing at the end of basic education and also not having an inspection system - are rich food for further thought for curriculum policy making.

4.6 Sources affecting curriculum practices

Taken the above comments together, a way forward looms up. They underpin the idea that curriculum practices at the school and classroom level depend on at least three sources: direction and pressure from the top, room for teachers

taking initiatives from the bottom, and support provided from aside (Kuiper, 2009; see figure 4). With regard to compulsory schooling in the Netherlands, direction and support from the top may be provided by a common, comprehensive and cohesive curriculum framework; room for site-specific interpretations and choices by trusting and fostering the professionalism of schools and teachers in school-based decision-making; and support from aside by means of (amongst other things) specification and exemplification.

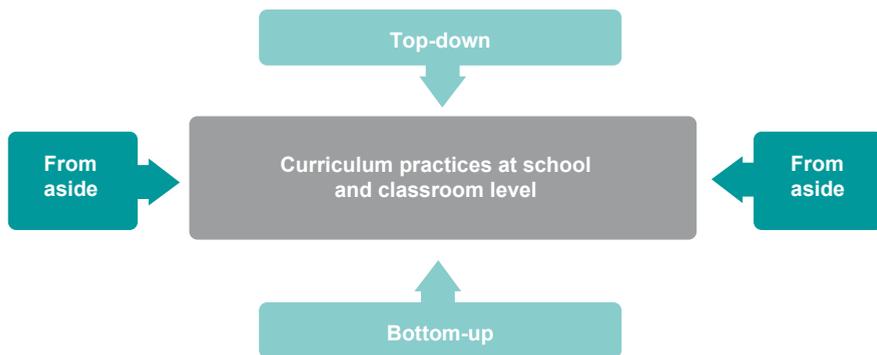


Figure 4: Sources of curriculum practices at school and classroom level

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