

# Initial Memorandum on Research Centre Curriculum Studiess

## Curriculum Practices in Context *Maart 2023*

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### About this memorandum

The UvA and SLO will jointly launch the RCCS in 2023. UvA and SLO each have their own expertise and focus. Their aim is to arrive at a common research agenda for RCCS which adds value to the current expertise of each party. To this end, the professor to be appointed will draw up a multi-annual research agenda. The purpose of this initial memorandum, which is based on two content-focused sessions with UvA and SLO colleagues, is to outline the content of the playing field in the run-up to the completion of this research agenda. This initial memorandum provides a framework for preparatory activities by the UvA and SLO to be carried out from March to December 2023.

### Curriculum practices

Curriculum is a multiple and layered concept that is relevant at the micro, meso and macro level. That is, from the drafting of national curricula to their implementation in the classroom. These scale levels each have their own dynamics and issues, and relevant research questions can be asked in relation to all of them. In addition, they interact with and influence each other. For example, choices made at one scale level can impact another scale level. This interaction between scale levels provides additional starting points for research questions.

We will initially focus on issues and problems in teaching practice. Curriculum practices in the classroom are not static objects imposed from above as they result from a dynamic interplay of many factors (Sinnema et al., 2020). Curriculum made in classrooms can be understood as a social and situated process: “a process of interaction of teachers, pupils, materials and the official context in class, entailing the construction of personal meaning by the participants in the process” (Priestley & Philippou, 2018, p. 153). In this context, it is crucial that teachers are seen as actors who consciously and continuously shape curriculum (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2013; Leeman et al., 2020; Pieters, 2022).

Teachers shape curriculum practices in their classrooms on a daily basis and make choices while doing so. These choices relate to the content and design of curriculum. They concern questions such as whether or not steps should be taken to align subject matter between different school subjects; whether language skills are to be taught as separate units or integrated; the attention to be paid to citizenship and democracy; the way in which curriculum content is linked up between primary and secondary education and between the lower and higher years of secondary education, etc. Teachers make all these choices in interaction with others and in a context that includes national frameworks, their school’s policies and teaching resources. Teachers’ own views, knowledge and skills and their interpretation of national frameworks and school policies are referred to as curriculum competences. These play an important role in shaping curriculum practices in the classroom.

Teachers’ shaping of curriculum practices and their underlying choices (curriculum choices) impact children’s learning in primary and secondary education. They influence what children learn and determine whether teachers provide pupils with a meaningful, coherent and equitable curriculum that prepares them for further education and participation in society.

### Context

Context at national and school level affects the content and form of curriculum practices in the classroom. Many people and organisations contribute to the quality of curriculum in the Netherlands. At a national level, goals for education are developed and detailed in guides, illustrative materials, learning resources, professionalisation activities, etc. Formulating and detailing goals involves decision making, such as which learning content will be taught to which groups of pupils. Herein, social and political issues often play a major role, as in the case of discussions about language and numeracy competences, citizenship, digital literacy and equal opportunities. In addition, decisions about who

needs to be involved when formulating goals are being made, as well as decisions on when and how to formulate these goals. Curriculum developers collaborate with educational practitioners, educationalists and subject-matter experts.

The Netherlands has a decentralised education system that offers schools a great deal of freedom. Individual schools formulate their own vision and make choices in terms of their subject matter profile, professionalisation, which subjects they offer, the extent of coherence between subjects, and the assessment of pupils. Innovations in school organisations and in relation to the professional development of teachers are closely linked to curriculum development in schools.

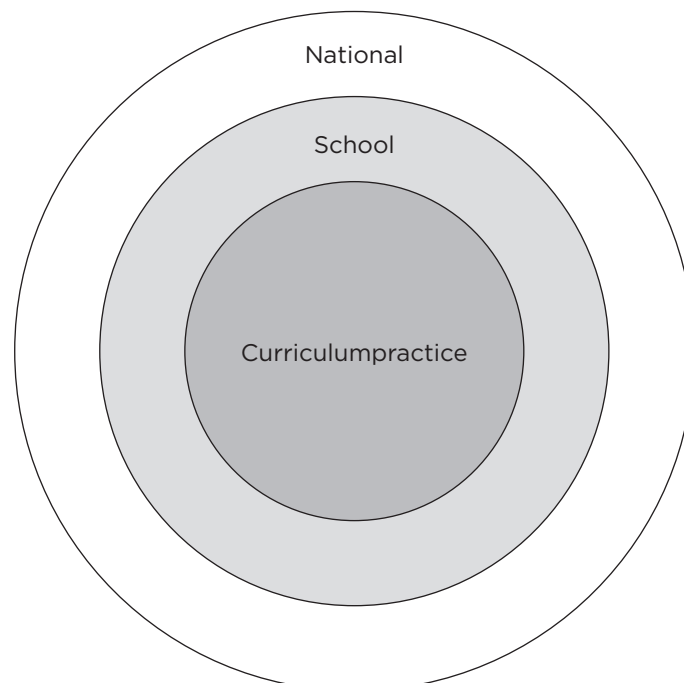
Aside from formulated goals, both the assessment of pupils and supervision of schools have a major impact on curriculum. Additionally, teacher training programmes and publisher's detailing of learning goals in teaching materials have a major impact on curriculum. Curriculum practices are also influenced by general education policies, such as policies focused on teachers and aimed at addressing learning backlogs, etc. Thus, the national curriculum is developed in a complex system with multiple actors, influenced by society and politics.

### **Curriculum practices in context**

In the RCCS, we will focus on a key subject-matter and methodological challenge: gaining better insight into separate classroom, school and national scale levels and into the interaction between these scale levels. This research will expectedly lead to insight into, and ultimately also solutions for, many current social challenges, debates and tasks for teachers. This concerns issues in the classroom, such as tackling unequal opportunities, increasing pupils' motivation to read and ensuring an adequate level of digital competence, which are dependent on, or influenced by, other scale levels. This also concerns issues relevant to all scale levels, such as updating curricula and reducing perceived work pressure and teacher shortages. These last two issues are currently stressing the quality and viability of the Dutch education system.

In line with the approach advocated by Deng (2018), the primary focus of our research will initially be on issues and problems in teaching practice. In the RCCS, we will research how teachers shape their curriculum practices in relation to frameworks at school and national level. In this context, we see teachers as active actors who (consciously and/or unconsciously) relate to their context: to frameworks at school and national level. We are interested in the ways in which teachers shape curriculum practices in terms of subject matter in primary and secondary education, as well as in different learning areas and school subjects. Our aim is to research the interaction between classroom, school and national scale levels and to assess how this interaction leads to a meaningful, coherent, inclusive and equitable curriculum for pupils.

In the RCCS, we will therefore focus on 'curriculum practices in context'. We will map actions of teachers and their day-to-day curriculum practices, analyse choices underlying these practices, and connect these practices and choices to factors and actors at school and national level (Figure 1).



**Figur 1:** Curriculum practice in the context of school and national level.

Developing curriculum in such a way that the national and school/classroom scale levels are well aligned remains a challenge in education (Nieveen et al., 2021). Possible reasons for this are the use of linear (top-down) approaches and the lack of ownership and support (e.g., Vreuls et al., 2022). An approach based on 'curriculum making' shows how shaping curriculum practices is a dynamic process of interpretation, mediation, negotiation and translation that takes place in different layers of the education system. Herein, teachers are more than passive conduits of someone else's curriculum product; they actively create curriculum in their own context (e.g. Priestley et al., 2021). From this perspective, curriculum decision-making processes are characterised by (e.g. Nieveen et al., 2021; Pietarinen et al., 2019):

- giving meaning to frameworks, contexts, elaborations;
- explicitly explaining and substantiating decisions;
- aligning underlying values, interests and motives with each other.

By gaining better insight into factors facilitating and impeding the process of 'curriculum making' by teachers at different scale levels, the quality of curriculum practices can be improved (e.g. Jenkins, 2020). We hope to contribute to more insight in, and possible solutions for, current social issues through our research (see above). This can also be helpful in designing support.

Exploring and interpreting curriculum practices always involves quality criteria. These criteria should also be understood as dynamic, socially constructed and situated. An important criterion, for example, is the extent to which pupils are able to acquire envisaged knowledge, skills and experiences. In the research agenda to be drawn up, we want to particularly address what is meant by a meaningful, coherent, inclusive and equitable curriculum and to what extent such a curriculum is currently in place.

## **Synergy and cooperation**

Taking the current expertise of the UvA and SLO into account, the joint research agenda of the RCCS offers additional value. The expertise of both organisations is complementary in terms of scale level and content.

The UvA's expertise in terms of the scale level of the curriculum is mainly focused on the micro level (subject-matter didactics) and meso level (education sciences). SLO's expertise is primarily focused on the curriculum at the macro level.

The RCCS will focus on separate classroom, school and national scale levels and on interaction between these levels. We will initially look at curriculum development at a micro level, but in relation to national and school levels. How does curriculum take shape in classrooms and how is this influenced by factors and processes at other scale levels? This is a meaningful question for SLO, as SLO wants to gain more insight into the implemented curriculum. UvA's expertise is complementary in this area. It is also a meaningful question for the UvA, as the interaction between scale levels is complex in terms of methodology and subject matter and relatively unexplored. SLO's expertise is complementary in this respect.

UvA's expertise in terms of the content of curriculum research is very broad. It encompasses research on subject-matter didactics (in relation to people & society, languages & arts and STEM, with a focus on coherence), as well as research in the field of education sciences into matters such as innovation processes, teachers and professionalisation, equal opportunities and motivation. SLO's expertise in curriculum content relates to curriculum design at national level (formulation of goals) in all learning areas and school subjects in primary and secondary education. SLO's approach is mostly based on a technical-educational methodology guided by models such as the ADDIE model.

The RCCS therefore sees curriculum as a conceptual bridge between research into subject-matter didactics and general concepts and practices in education sciences. After all, well-known curriculum concepts such as coherence or continuous learning pathways are only meaningful when related to the content of specific school subjects. When those relationships are established, the concept of curriculum gains more concrete meaning. Curriculum also offers added value in relation to approaches based on subject-matter didactics. Research based on subject-matter didactics often focuses on specific parts of curriculum. It is difficult to make statements about curriculum as a whole on the basis of such research, and there is a risk that coherence between learning areas receives too little attention.

Although research conducted by the RCCS will mainly focus on Dutch schools, we want to emphasise RCCS' international ambitions. In terms of collaboration, orientation, and dissemination of our research, we will also explicitly focus on research and researchers outside the Netherlands.

## Coming period

The broad theme of curriculum practices in context offers an interesting but also wide range of possibilities. Therefore, we will first explore the central concepts in more detail by conducting a review of relevant literature. This can serve as a basis for a research agenda, which will lead to more empirical research projects.

The review will focus on teachers' shaping of curriculum practices, within the context of national and school levels. The literature review will adopt a more dynamic approach, focusing on alignment between scale levels. The exact research questions are yet to be determined.

Specific themes to be delved into more deeply can be explored later and could possibly be linked to the ongoing process of updating the national curriculum. This could concern matters such as requirements set for a curriculum (e.g. aligned, meaningful, equitable) and updating of a curriculum, as well as alignment of decision-making processes around a curriculum between different scale levels (including how everything comes together at school level).

The aim is to complete the literature review by 1 September 2023, after which we will start drafting the research agenda.

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