EVALUATION OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CURRICULUM MATERIALS FOR CIVICS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Our evaluative study, which is reported here, is linked with a civics project initiated by the Dutch National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) during the 1980s. The project focused on the education of twelve-to sixteen-year-old students at the lower-secondary level and was executed at request of the Dutch National Association for Social Studies Teachers. At that time, there was much ideo-logical confusion and disagreement about what should be taught under the rubric of civics (a regularly scheduled subject, along with history, geography, and economics) and how it should be taught. The beliefs of teachers, teacher trainers, and subject-matter specialists in The Netherlands reflected uncertainty about the appropriate civics scope and sequence, as well as about the subject's status (cf. Stodolsky 1991; Thornton 1991, 1994). From administrators' and students' perspectives, the status of civics was low. In addition, teacher training was regarded as inadequate, both in content and in pedagogy.

After some pilot activities, a large-scale curriculum development project was started, aiming at the development of a proposal for a macro-curricular framework for civics, guidelines for planning civics at school level, and exemplary teaching packages.

All these curriculum documents were completed by the end of the project in 1987, at a total cost of about \$2 million. The curriculum framework and guidelines for schools were combined into a comprehensive handbook, containing a proposal for core-curriculum civics for lower-secondary education as well. Twelve teaching packages arranged by theme were published, each comprising a series of lessons for seven or eight periods. Some of the themes were labor, mass media, municipal politics, addiction, consuming, and criminal law and criminality. These themes had been derived from thematic fields in which various social and political phenomena and problems could be classified (education; labor and leisure; state and society; home and environment; technology and society; international relations). The curriculum might be classified as a critical or reflective thinking approach (Thornton 1994), aimed at promoting students' capabilities in coping critically and creatively with social and political phenomena and problems (Hooghoff 1990).

The project proclaimed explicitly some pedagogical principles aimed at an increase in the social commitment of the students and at an advancement in the quality of their learning process. The developers tried to incorporate these principles into the teaching packages. The most important pedagogical principles were:

1. The lessons should support the formation of essential concepts on the basis of concrete features and should therefore be linked to known and experiential matters.
2. The lessons series should start with an introduction, providing the students with an overview of the content of the whole series and pointing out its crucial elements.
3. The instructional approach should offer many opportunities for association and use of multiple senses.
4. The teaching style should stimulate both independent and cooperative learning.

The Central Research Question

The central research question of this evaluative study was: How do civics teachers use the SLO-teaching packages in their lesson planning and execution? The study stemmed primarily from a growing concern about the impact of SLO products. The SLO is a largely government-funded institute, carrying out curriculum development projects for all kinds of subjects in elementary, secondary, vocational, and adult education. The SLO has no authority to impose curricula on schools; its main task is to improve the quality of educational policies and practices by developing proposals for and examples of new curricula. Main target audiences are intermediary groups like educational publishers, teacher training institutes, and school advisory centers (van Bruggen 1987). As it is in many other countries, the dissemination and the implementation of many new curriculum proposals in The Netherlands are often rather troublesome. Responses to SLO products, if known, are often moderately positive, but their actual use in schools and classrooms is rather limited. Specific changes in teaching approaches and student outcomes are difficult to trace.

To avoid being vulnerable to discrepancies between what people think, say, and do, this study focused on systematic and direct observation of the actual use of the SLO teaching packages in practice (cf. van den Akker 1988). Different data collection methods were used (triangulation), and attention was paid to the following curriculum representations (Goodlad, Klein, and Tye 1979): the ideal curriculum (the original ideas and intentions of the developers), the formal curriculum (documents and materials), the perceived curriculum (the teachers' interpretation of the curriculum), the operational curriculum (the actual instructional process in the classroom), and the experiential curriculum (students' experiences and outcomes).

The study focused on the role of the teacher. Comprehensive studies in the United States (Goodlad 1984; Stake and Easley 1978; see also Thornton 1991) have demonstrated the uncertain scope and status of social studies and also revealed that most teachers did not use innovative instructional strategies (such as promoting inquiry learning) as proposed by many curriculum reformers. These findings also seemed relevant to the Dutch situation because the unclear position of civics was one of the main reasons for launching the project and because the project had rather ambitious instructional goals.

Before trying to answer the central research question, we first explored the broader context for implementation, knowing that contextual factors heavily influence reactions and decisions of individual teachers (Fullan 1991). This general finding had also been confirmed for social studies teachers (Thornton 1991).

Methods

The study consisted of two parts. The first (and relatively minor) part explored the broad context for implementation. Semi-structured interviews were held with the curriculum developers, civics teachers who had been remotely associated with the development activities, teacher trainers, and inspectors.

The main part of the study focused on the actual use of the SLO teaching packages by eighteen teachers who had only remote or no previous involvement with the project. Three out of twelve teaching packages (labor, mass media, and municipal politics, representing the social, cultural and political strands of the curriculum respectively) were selected for evaluation purposes. Each package required about eight class periods and

was used by six teachers. Data collection consisted of (a) direct observation, with note taking, of all 144 periods, using an observation scheme based on a curriculum profile of each of the three teaching packages; (b) retrospective interviews with the eighteen teachers involved about the teaching package, the lessons, and their role; and (c) written tests for all students ($N = 342$) at the end of the lesson series.

The idea for using curriculum profiles emerged from earlier innovation studies (Leithwood and Montgomery 1982; Loucks et al. 1982). A curriculum profile of a teaching package provided operational descriptions of the proposed lessons in precise behavioral terms. Each profile identified several (usually four) components regarded by the developers as essential for the realization of the lesson series. Those components were broken down into elements, with a differentiation among threshold elements (necessary for acceptable use), ideal elements (contributing to an optimal realization), and unacceptable elements (harming the realization of the intentions behind the materials). The developers had determined the differentiations and had been asked to assign a positive or a negative numerical value to each of the approximately forty elements in each profile. Each profile contained a potential maximum of one hundred points, divided among the components and specified for each element. The observation data, recorded in the checklists, were used to draw up a user profile and a resulting user score for each teacher. The curriculum profiles were based on a detailed analysis of the three teaching packages, were repeatedly discussed with and revised by the curriculum developers, and were piloted during twenty-one lessons. For economic reasons, observation activities were divided between the two of us, using the same checklist and set of written observational instructions. Afterward we checked all recorded data and scores.

Results

The results of the first part of the study, which focused on the broad implementation context, were the following:

1. The position of civics in the national educational debate was rather weak: if it received any attention at all, the discussion was often rather negative in tone.
2. School administrators and parents showed little interest in the subject and avoided content discussions.
3. The attitude of teachers of other subjects varied: Some took civics seriously; many others considered it a cluttered subject. History, geography, and economics teachers generally demonstrated a more positive attitude than did teachers of other subjects.
4. The civics teachers operated in isolation, with only a quarter of the teachers reporting fruitful deliberations and common planning with colleagues.
5. The teachers had few opportunities and little external support for professional development.
6. Both teachers and inspectors expressed mixed feelings about the impact of the project on classroom processes. Some doubted the feasibility of the guidelines and suggestions in the materials, especially related to the teaching approach, with its strong emphasis on nontraditional student activities, such as simulation games and group assignments.
7. The inspectors sketched a very dispirited picture of the status and position of civics in lower-secondary education.
8. The distribution of the materials in the schools was very limited.

As our general conclusion, we decided that it seemed obvious that the preconditions for implementation of the materials were unfavorable.

The most striking result from the main part of the study was a very large discrepancy between the curriculum actually provided in the classroom (the operational curriculum, expressed by the user score) and the original intentions of the developers (the ideal curriculum). From the possible maximum of 100 points, the average user score was 33.8 ($N = 18$; $SD = 19.8$). This figure is even more sobering in view of the fact that the scores for an acceptable realization of the teaching packages varied from 57 to 60. No significant differences existed in the average scores for the three packages considered separately or for more- or less-experienced teachers.

An in-depth analysis of how teachers used the packages showed that many components had been neglected. In particular, teachers had strongly adapted or even totally ignored the suggestions for more innovative and demanding instructional activities. Changes in activities had been made so they would comply more closely with teachers' judgments of what is feasible for themselves and their students. The following examples illustrate the need for such changes.

First, based on pedagogical and instructional principles, the teaching packages contained suggestions for a wide variety of active learning activities. For example, the first part of each package focused on an active, playful, and clear introduction to an important concept. In the labor and the municipal politics sections, a simulation game introduced the concept. In the latter, students were to simulate a town council meeting that would include a debate on the municipal budget, deliberations within and between political parties, a vote on a budget, and the like. The purpose of this game was to let students discover the dynamics of policymaking. The developers intended the simulation to precede more formal and detailed instruction and to play an informative role. This approach turned out to be not very successful. Only one of the six teachers who used the municipal politics section handled the simulation game as the developers had intended--that is, as a two-period, active, exploratory introduction to the theme. Four of five teachers let the students play the game but only after teaching the composition and procedures in a detailed way and without the necessary debriefing. In the teachers' opinion, in-depth knowledge of important concepts was a prerequisite for playing the game. One teacher dropped the game completely. In general, the teachers appeared to prefer beginning the consideration of a new topic with a style of lecturing that was more in line with their daily routines.

Second, the teachers made similar adaptations to the various suggestions for student activities that emphasized self-discovery of subject matter fragments. For example, in the mass media section, an important element was the selectivity of the information presented in newspapers, a bias that is, as was stated in the teaching package, due partly to the way newspapers are produced. The package clearly suggested that the students should work in small groups, making lists of persons who are involved in the successive stages of newspaper production and analyzing how information was selected. Most of the teachers dropped this discovery-oriented student activity (and comparable ones in the other two teaching packages) and preferred a frontal, whole-group lecture approach.

Third, teachers also frequently adapted the suggested general structure of the lessons and the sequence of instructional activities. For example, many teachers neglected the suggestion to summarize taught concepts at the end of the lessons. They observed the relationships between consecutive lessons only in a very rough way. In the mass media segment, the following sequence of activities was suggested: Compile a list of people involved in newspaper production, discuss the results as a class, read and analyze a sensational newspaper article, watch a movie showing the production of a newspaper. At the end of the sequence, the teacher was to emphasize the relationship between the newspaper production process and the selectivity of newspaper information, stressing continuously the concepts of selectivity and coloring of information. Not one of the six teachers who used this teaching package followed this carefully designed sequence. Only parts of it could be traced.

Fourth, the teachers often neglected essential concepts. This lapse made it difficult for students to understand the more abstract concepts, such as selecting and coloring information by the media, labor partition in the labor segment, and stages in political decision making in municipal politics. Generally, teachers focused on more concrete and relatively simple concepts, such as the functions and characteristics of labor, sources and functions of information in the media, and the composition and the responsibilities of the municipality in the municipal politics section.

We concluded that the teachers who used the developers' projects trivialized their intentions and suggestions. In contrast, most teachers did express a moderate satisfaction with the lessons taught. Explaining their instructional adaptations, they said that many of the suggested activities required too much preparation time, were too difficult for the students, took too much lesson time, were at the expense of the content itself, and were unusual for the students and for them.

Discussion

The main result from this study--the conclusion that a very large discrepancy between the operational and the ideal curriculum existed--was obviously disappointing to the developers of the civics curriculum. Many significant adaptations in the three teaching packages studied detracted from several of the project's core intentions. Thus the influence of the curriculum materials appeared to be limited, especially on changing specific teaching behaviors. The overall picture confirmed the image of teachers as "curricular-instructional gatekeepers" (Thornton 1991) or "cultural mediators" (Marker and Mehlinger 1992) who reshape curriculum proposals to fit their own beliefs, their purposes, their established teaching routines, their perceptions of what can be accomplished with a particular group of students, and their view on the organizational feasibility of the suggestions made. We concluded that the reactions of the teachers appear to underline the dominance of their "practicality ethic" (Doyle and Ponder 1977-78; see also Thornton 1991, 245). What works and what appears practical appear to go a long way to accounting for what and how the teachers teach (Thornton 1994, 226).

An analysis of the implementation context convinced us that the preconditions for effective use of the curriculum materials were unfavorable. In particular, we agreed with Fullan (1990) that the lack of commitment in the social environment and the absence of personal support increased the probability that adaptation to more routine activities would occur.

In such a context, the potential impact depends very much on the quality of the materials themselves. The intended changes in teachers' behaviors and beliefs become largely dependent on the written materials alone. This may seem an impossible task. But a closer look at the materials points out various potential weaknesses in the materials. Although many respondents suggested the materials were quite imaginative, we found some basis for criticism. For example, our analysis of the materials within the framework of Brophy and Alleman (1991) suggested rather simple improvements of their primary principles (goals relevance, appropriate level of difficulty, feasibility, cost effectiveness). Moreover, the materials sometimes showed a lack of clarity and specification about the essential characteristics of the proposed teaching approach. As a result, a high degree of false clarity appeared because many teachers expressed a mildly positive judgment about the lessons (Fullan 1991).

As a part of its development strategy, the SLO project had collected evaluative data on the quality of the curriculum materials by holding group discussions with teachers and through written teacher comments, a very common evaluation approach in curriculum development practices. Reflecting on the results of our study, we recommend a more implementation-oriented development strategy with a strong emphasis on early and intensive formative evaluation, that focuses more on systematic collection and analysis Of empirical data on classroom processes to improve the practicality and effectiveness of curriculum materials (cf. van den Akker 1994). Such an approach, however, will not guarantee effective implementation of all kinds of highly innovative products. A combination of realistic visions and step-by-step, well-orchestrated innovative strategies seems necessary for making progress in curriculum improvement.

REFERENCES

- van den Akker, J. 1988. The teacher as learner in curriculum implementation. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 20 (1) (January-February): 47-55.
- . 1994. Designing innovations from an implementation perspective. In *The international encyclopedia of education*, second edition, edited by T. Husen and T.N. Postlethwaite. Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon.
- Brophy, J., and J. Alleman. 1991. Activities as instructional tools: A framework for analysis and evaluation. *Educational Researcher* 20(4) (May): 9-23.
- van Bruggen, J.C. 1987. The problems and possibilities of the impact evaluation of institutes for curriculum development. *Studies in Educational Evaluation* 13 (3): 231-246.
- Doyle, W., and G. Ponder. 1977-78. The practicality ethic in teacher decision making. *Interchange* 8 (3): 1-12.
- Fullan, M. G. 1990. Staff development, innovation and institutional development. In *Changing school culture through staff development*, edited by B. Joyce. Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- . 1991. *The new meaning of educational change*. New York: Teacher College Press.
- Goodlad, J. I. 1984. *A place called school*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Goodlad, J. I., M. F. Klein, and K. Tye. 1979. The domains of curriculum and their study. In *Curriculum inquiry: The study of curriculum practice*, edited by J.I. Goodlad et al. New York: McGraw-Hill, 43-76.

Hooghoff, H. 1990. Toward a curriculum for social and political education in The Netherlands. *Educational Leadership* 48 (3) (November): 23-25.

Leithwood, K. A., and D. J. Montgomery. 1982. A framework for planned educational change: Application to the assessment of program implementation. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 4 (2) (September): 157-167.

Loucks, S. F., J. E. Bauchner, D. Crandall, W. H. Schmidt, and J. W. Eiseman. 1982. *People, policies and practices: Examining the chain of school improvement*. Vols. I-X. Andover, Mass.: The Network.

Marker, G., and H. Mehlinger. 1992. Social Studies. In *Handbook of research on curriculum*, edited by P.W. Jackson. New York: Macmillan, 830-851.

Stake, R. E., and J. A. Easley. 1978. Case studies in science education: Vol. II. Design, overview, and findings. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois.

Stodolsky, S. S. 1988. *The subject matters: Classroom activity in math and social studies*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Thornton, S. J. 1991. Teacher as curricular-instructional gatekeeper in social studies. In *Handbook of research on social studies thinking and learning*, edited by J.P. Shaver. New York: Macmillan, 237-248.

-----, 1994. The social studies near century's end: Reconsidering patterns of curriculum and instruction. In *Review of research in education*, edited by L. Darling-Hammond. Washington: AERA.

~~~~~

By WILMAD KUIPER and JAN VAN DEN AKKER

WILMAD KUIPER is an assistant professor of education, and JAN VAN DEN AKKER is associate professor of education. Both are working at the University of Twente, Faculty of Educational Sciences and Technology, Department of Curriculum, The Netherlands.

Copyright of Social Studies is the property of Heldref Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.