

Toward a Curriculum for Social and Political Education in the Netherlands

As a result of the efforts of many participants, Social and Political Education now has prominent status in secondary education in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has had little tradition of Political Education in its formal education system. Not until the end of the sixties, when various sectors of society appealed to the government to improve the social relevance of education, was a new compulsory subject—*maatschappijleer*, the study of society, social studies—introduced at the secondary school level. The subject's inclusion was also precipitated by the struggle of large groups of the population toward a re-evaluation and reformulation of our society's values and standards. Now it has become the task of schooling to make young people aware of the possibility of giving shape to their present and future situation in life.¹

Background and Overview

The fact that, when the subject was introduced, the government had scarcely indicated what its content should be (as long as it was not a pocket-sized version of sociology) necessitated much additional curriculum development. Lack of agreement on the substance of the course impeded acceptance of a curriculum and hindered agreement on what qualifications teachers should have. In schools, this vague subject was viewed

with suspicion and some concern. Well-meaning teachers were up against the negative image that pupils, colleagues, school management, and parents had of their subject.

In the seventies, the climate was char-

acterized by heated ideological debates (centering on German critical theories) and, therefore, was unfavorable for reaching the desired consensus on basic content. But in the early eighties it became somewhat clearer what the con-

Photograph by Anthe Rugevik

A new aspect of Social and Political Education in the Netherlands is affording students greater insight into and respect for each other's way of life, learnings that are valuable in a multiethnic society.



tent of maatschappijleer might be. In 1983, at the request of educational and social organizations, the National Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) launched a six-year project (1981-1987), leading to the publication of a *Visie op Maatschappijleer (View on Social and Political Education, Project Team for Social and Political Studies 1983)*.²

This action was the main source of inspiration for the ministerial study groups who opened the way to an experimental final examination with their report, *Naar een Eindexamen Maatschappijleer (Towards an Examination Maatschappijleer, 1983)*. During 1985, the government set up a Structural Committee for Examinations in Social and Political Studies to formulate descriptions of subject matter. Finally, in May 1987, when students first took the exam, teachers and the Ministry received it favorably, and moreover, it got good press. By 1992 its status as a final examination, either optional or compulsory, should be permanent.

The curriculum project of the SLO aimed at the development of both a core curriculum that was widely approved of by teachers and the production of teaching kits and a flexible manual. In other words: a project that aimed at the improvement of the quality of Social and Political Education in secondary education.

The Structural Committee is developing, at the Minister's request, an examination program for Social and Political Education, which is also based on the experience and the results of the SLO curriculum project. (Project members participate in the examination committee because of the necessity to ensure coherence between curriculum and assessment.)

Dawn of a Core Curriculum

The year 1987 also saw the publication of the SLO project results, a large number of documents stating the basic principles, tested lesson plans, and a detailed core curriculum for social studies.³

The core curriculum describes not only the goals and content of Social and Political Education but also the "final terms." Final terms unambig-

uously describe the minimal body of knowledge and skills all pupils are to acquire by the end of a certain stage of schooling. In the centralized Dutch educational system, final terms, laid down by the Minister, are designed to enhance the quality of education. Quality control consists of national written examinations (the same questions at the same moment for all pupils), preceded by school-based assessment.

The recommended core curriculum has been field-tested by means of a concrete pilot lesson series. Aimed at pupils aged 14 to 16, this core curriculum is compulsory within the school program and is now being implemented in the Dutch educational system, with the government, examination committees, the inspectorate, publishers, and teacher training colleges playing leading roles (Tierolf 1988). The current experimental examination for Social and Political Education (1983-1992), a government initiative, holds hopeful prospects that the recommended core curriculum will be adopted.

It is likely that in the future maatschappijleer for 12- to 15-year-olds will be an integral part of the subject History/Civics. However, for all pupils 16 to 19 years old, Social and Political Education remains a compulsory subject with the possibility of participating in an examination. In 1989 the SLO started a new curriculum project for this age group.

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Content of the Core Curriculum

According to the National Institute for Curriculum Development, the aim of social studies is to develop knowledge, insight, and skills in pupils so that they are "increasingly capable of coping critically and creatively with current social and political phenomena and problems" (Project Team for Social and Political Studies 1987).

We do not pretend that in the course of 80 lessons over two years, pupils will become "critical and creative," but the curriculum does lay the foundation. What we have in mind is increasing students' knowledge and insight in four areas.

1. *Knowledge of and insight into the interdependence among one's own experiences, questions, and opinions and the structures and problems characteristic of society.* Social studies underscores the conscious or unconscious agreements people make concerning the way they cope with social problems. That is, there are rules of behavior and procedures for handling problems in the family, the work place, or in politics. These do not come out of the blue: they are invented by people—either inspired by a political view or religion or not—and handed down to new members of society through various socialization processes. Viewed in this way, people are "products of their society." In their turn, people can also become "producers" if they question rules and procedures and are willing to change them.

2. *Knowledge of and insight into one's own standards and values, views, and interests and those of other people and groups.* The pupils' own experiences, opinions, and questions necessarily entail standards, values, and interests. It is important that they learn to recognize these in themselves and, as a logical next step, that they acknowledge the standards, values, and interests of others. Such an awareness provides insight into what certain groups deem desirable for society and the solution of its problems.

3. *Knowledge of and insight into the changeability or permanence of particular structures within society and*

the solvability of social problems. At least as important as the awareness noted in item 2 is that students realize that values, standards, and interests are related to various positions of power in society. This knowledge gives them a realistic view of the changeability or permanence of particular structures within society, which is essential for coping critically with social problems. "Coping critically" means that pupils can look at problems and phenomena from several points of view in order to analyze motives and distinguish facts from opinions. We want pupils to question things taken for granted; this implies that we also wish to stimulate them to view social phenomena and problems from different viewpoints and to be open to various solutions before making their own choices.

4. *Skills in gathering information on social problems and phenomena and in applying this information, enabling pupils to be socially active if they so wish.* The intention of social studies—by offering pupils applicable knowledge, insights, and skills—is to enable them to *act*. Notably, this means that they will choose to participate in society, for example, by joining a club, exercising the right to vote, having a conscience about social issues. Insight into the social power structure empowers students to view their own ability to act, and that of others, realistically. Often enough, pupils say, "There's nothing we can do anyway," or they set their hopes too high regarding what they can achieve. This insight prevents overoptimism and undue pessimism.

The content of social studies is organized in thematic fields, within which various social and political phenomena and problems are classified. The issues included are presented illustratively to the pupils in a form they recognize and in a meaningful context. The thematic fields are Education, Work and Leisure, State and Society, Home/House/Environment, Technology and Society, and International Relations.

The Status of Social and Political Education Today

In the year 1990, Social and Political Education has obtained the status it

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deserves in Dutch secondary education. It has become generally accepted that children should be taught to develop a well-founded judgment about controversial issues. This not only concerns the basic knowledge and the requirement of insight, but also the development of attitudes. Values such as respect and tolerance, democracy and freedom, as well as social responsibilities, are part of the core of the curriculum.

The SLO project highly stimulated the improvement of the status of maatschappijleer, especially because it succeeded in obtaining consensus at a national level. The Structural Committee Examination "maatschappijleer" also played an important part in the development of the subject and its implementation in schools. The development of Social and Political Education shows how in the Netherlands it has become the norm for a school to offer education that is socially relevant. □

¹For example, by illustrating the distinction between "social" and "political," we hope to stimulate students to form their own opinions about what should and what should not be taken care of by the government. Social studies is not about strictly personal or individual problems of people who organize their lives together as a community. If a personal or individual problem affects society, it is a social problem. Sometimes people organize themselves and make the relevant decisions that give shape to society. Other times, authority is transferred to politics.

If a phenomenon or problem connected with people's living together appears on the political agenda, then it is considered a political phenomenon or problem. Politics is thus a special decision-making process

with regard to social phenomena and problems. By this definition, political phenomena and problems are always of a social nature; but, on the other hand, politics is not always the institution deciding on social problems. In other words, the social includes the political (quoted from *Core Curriculum for Social and Political Studies*, SLO 1987).

²The SLO, established in 1975, is governed by a managing board representing the national educational bodies and the school subject areas. It renders services at the request of the national Department of Education and Sciences and other educational bodies and institutes. For example, it develops and publishes model curriculums and coordinates curriculum development for the Dutch educational system. SLO has no authority to impose curriculums. Its publications contain suggestions and examples, which predominantly help teachers and school teams to solve curricular problems. These include a wide variety of written matter and audiovisual materials and software for various subjects and school types. SLO products are the result of close cooperation with practicing teachers, partners in the educational support structure and, if relevant, trade and industry.

³The Project Team has published: a core curriculum for Social and Political Education for 14- to 16-year-olds; a handbook for planning this school subject; and lesson plans and lesson series as examples of the core curriculum (media, crime, family, information technology, government, Europe, Third World).

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