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Teaching, curriculum and purposes of education: connecting theory and practice

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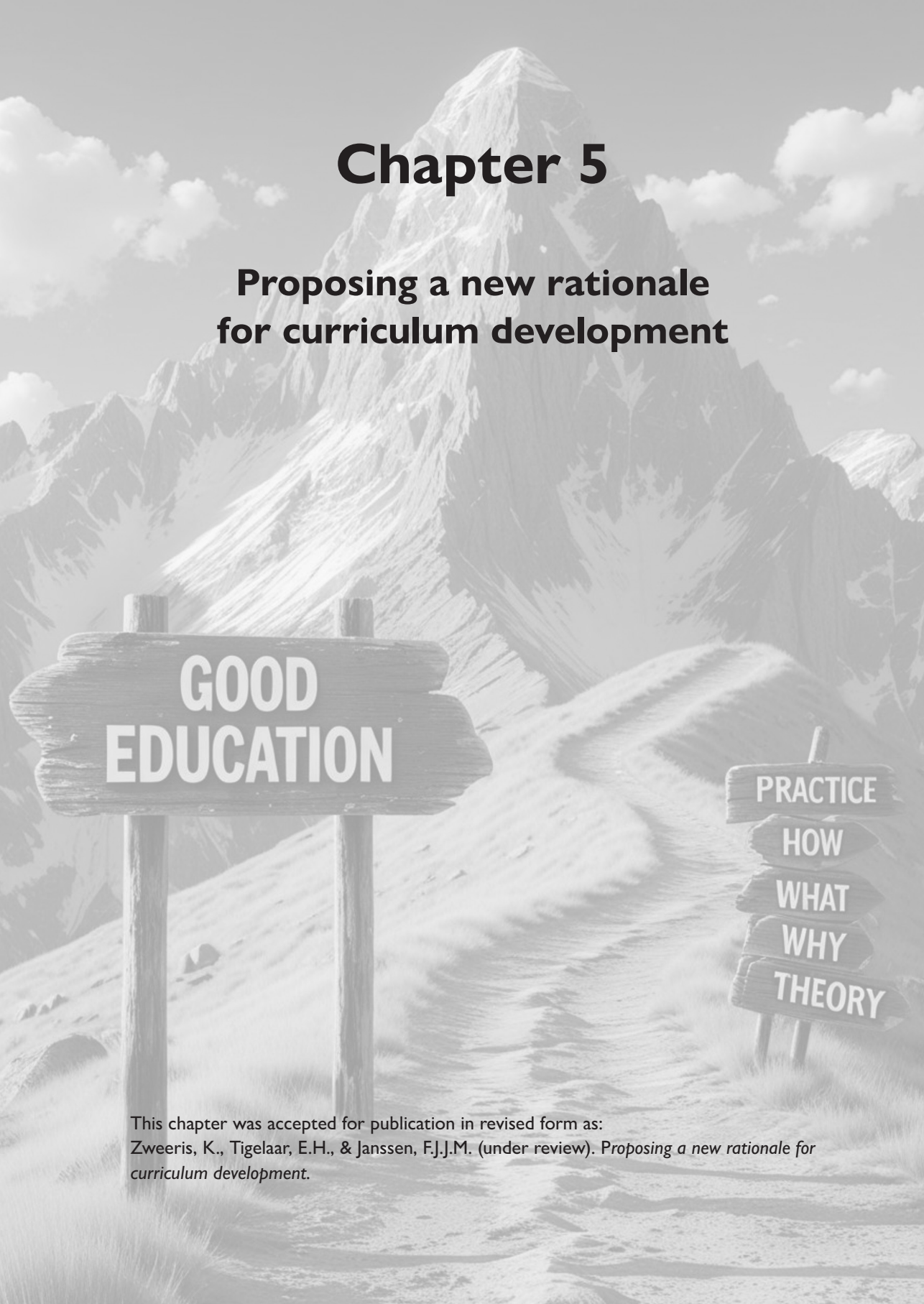
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Chapter 5

Proposing a new rationale for curriculum development



**GOOD
EDUCATION**

PRACTICE

HOW

WHAT

WHY

THEORY

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Abstract

There has been considerable focus on curriculum reform at all levels of curriculum development (micro, meso, macro) in the Netherlands in the past decade. The goal domains of qualification, socialisation and personal development have perpetually been suggested as a guiding rationale for curriculum development. Despite considerable efforts to revise the curriculum on a national level, the desired revision was not achieved, and the most recent reform initiative reflects a narrow conception of purposes of education. The aim of this chapter is to critically discuss curriculum reform processes in the Netherlands and propose that a different framework, which builds on the goal domains, should be applied as a guiding rationale. For each level of curriculum development, we present a case to illustrate how the proposed framework can be used to gain insights into positions regarding purposes of education, and hypothesise how these insights can support dialogues about curriculum development. Finally, we argue that the various positions in the proposed guiding rationale should be viewed as complementary instead of mutually exclusive in future curriculum reform processes.

5.1 Introduction

In the Netherlands there has been considerable focus on curriculum development at all levels within the education system (micro, meso, macro). Although the Dutch education system is characterised by its constitutional freedom of education, which allows Dutch citizens to found fully funded schools based on their own philosophical, pedagogical and psychological views, schools (meso level) and teachers' teaching practices (micro level) are inextricably linked to curriculum developments and the core goals and objectives established by the government on a national level (macro level; Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Nieveen, 2017). Nevertheless, schools and teachers in the Netherlands are highly autonomous in their development and enactment of a curriculum and there is a call for increased attention to curriculum development at the school level (Nieveen & Van den Akker, 2023). At the micro level, the importance of developing expertise in curriculum development during teacher training is also emphasised, as teachers are the key agents in curriculum implementation (Nieveen, 2017). Despite the significant attention given to curriculum development, large-scale projects have not resulted in the desired revision of the Dutch curriculum.

In this position paper we will illustrate how deliberations about curriculum reforms often result in narrow conceptions of purposes of education and curriculum. We position the challenges faced by curriculum reforms in a broader, scientific discussion and argue that there is a need for a rationale that guides the dialogue about curriculum reforms, without being prescriptive. To support engagement in critical dialogue about curriculum reforms and create a mutual understanding among actors involved in the process, the rationale should allow actors to position themselves in relation to multiple elaborations of general purposes of education. We argue that the framework of goal domains, which is often suggested as a rationale for curriculum reforms in the Netherlands, is not sufficient as a guiding framework. We do not argue that the goal domains should be abandoned, but rather that the framework needs to be further developed by combining it with curriculum orientations (Schiro, 2013), thus providing more guidance in reflecting on general purposes of education.

5.2 Curriculum development

Developing or reforming a curriculum is a challenging task. Curriculum is often experienced as elusive, fragmented and confusing (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2014). The Dutch education system and the process of curriculum reform are characterised by a complex dynamic between government control and a high level of autonomy of schools in developing their own curricula. On the one hand, according to the Dutch Constitution the government is responsible for developing and maintaining a coherent system of educational facilities (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011). On the other hand, the “freedom of education” stipulated in the Dutch Constitution allows citizens to establish a government funded school and curriculum that aligns with their philosophical, pedagogical and psychological views (Bronneman-Helmers, 2011; Nieveen & Van den Akker, 2023). Consequently, curriculum reforms on a national level are complicated by the fact that they need to take account of both the government’s responsibility for the public interest of its citizens and the schools’ autonomy in curriculum development. In addition, curricula are often experienced as fragmented, incoherent and overloaded and, despite perpetual initiatives to solve these problems, a Dutch “scientific curriculum committee” found that the same problems underlie the most recent proposed curriculum reforms (Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie, 2021). Research has also shown that there is often a discrepancy between the intended curriculum and the curriculum as interpreted and implemented by schools and teachers (Goodlad, 1979; Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling, 2009; Van den Akker, 2003). Sixty years ago, Taba (1963, p. 413) argued that curriculum development is a challenging process that should be guided by an extensive theoretical or conceptual framework. Given the variety of interests and desires of various actors on different levels of curriculum development and enactment, there is a need to develop a framework that provides insight into the rich diversity of purposes of education. This rationale should allow actors to interpret curricular choices made in the past, provide clarity and guidance in the purposes of education that may have been underexposed historically, and offer a starting point for future curricular choices.

5.3 Curriculum reform in the Netherlands: One-sidedness and a lack of direction

Many actors have argued for national curriculum reform that includes a broad conception of student development and good education (Biesta, 2010, 2015; Onderwijsraad, 2013, 2016). As a result, three goal domains were prescribed as the rationale and starting point for curriculum development and reforms: 1) qualification: the attainment of knowledge, skills and dispositions that prepare individuals for their next steps in life and allow them to act; 2) socialisation: the introduction to and orientation on cultures, values and traditions; and 3) personal development:¹² the development of independence and responsibility in relation to liberties one will receive as an adult.

The importance of the goal domains was emphasised in several projects aimed at reforming the curriculum in the Netherlands. However, the advisory reports from these projects did not result in curriculum reform, therefore a scientific curriculum committee was established to advise the Dutch government on curriculum reforms at the national level (Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie, 2020). In its first advisory report, the committee reiterated that the goal domains should be regarded as a guiding rationale for curriculum reform. In the same period, the Dutch Minister of Primary and Secondary Education initiated a curriculum reform project called the Basic Skills Masterplan (Tweede Kamer, *Kamerstukken II*, 32650290, 2022), which assigned the Dutch primary and secondary education system and the Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling (SLO; a Dutch institute for curriculum development) the task of reforming the curriculum, with a focus on language, arithmetic, citizenship and digital literacy. As a result, the curriculum reform process reverted to a one-sided view on purposes of education. Moreover, the parliamentary documents informing the Dutch Parliament about the progress being made with the Basic Skills Masterplan appear to indicate that the Dutch members of parliament do not

¹² Biesta (2010) refers to this domain as subjectification, whereas in the Dutch context it is often referred to as *persoonsvorming*, which is difficult to translate directly into English. “Personal development” was chosen as a general, but somewhat unsatisfactory translation.

have a good understanding of the goal domains. In one parliamentary document the former Minister of Primary and Secondary Education wrote that, in view of criticisms from the House of Representatives, the Dutch government would not prescribe core objectives related to socialisation and personal development. In that same document, however, the Minister informed the House of Representatives on the progress being made with developing core curricular objectives in terms of citizenship skills. Prescribing core objectives for citizenship skills is prescribing core objectives related to the socialisation domain *par excellence*.

At the school level, schools have been tasked with developing a curriculum that reflects a balance between the three goal domains. An evaluation by Oomens et al. (2020) of the quality requirements that school boards must legally satisfy and for which they are accountable, such as requirements related good education, including the goal domains, revealed that schools found it difficult to integrate all three goal domains. On the one hand, the participants reported that although they could combine the stronger focus on qualification with giving attention to the socialisation and personal development domains, they found it difficult to define curricular goals related to the latter two domains. On the other hand, participants reported that the strong focus on qualification goals for which they are held accountable limited their options to focus on socialisation and personal development goals. Even though the goal domains have been suggested as a guiding rationale for curriculum development and reforms for the past fifteen years—advice recently reiterated by the scientific curriculum committee (Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie, 2020)—the integration and balancing of the goal domains in the Dutch education system has been unsuccessful.

This illustration of the Dutch initiatives for curriculum reform shows that engaging in dialogue about purposes of education can be a challenging endeavour. On the national level, it appears that the Dutch government does not fully comprehend the goal domains. Moreover, anyone who reads the advisory reports on curriculum reforms will observe that the definitions of the goal domains in the introduction of each report are different, and after this they are barely mentioned in the elaboration of curricular goals. The goal domains as a rationale for engaging

in dialogue about purposes of education have proven to give insufficient guidance and concrete focus, which may explain why the government has failed to reform the curriculum on a national level.

5.4 A guiding rationale for general purposes of education: Focusing on complementarity instead of mutual exclusion

Reflecting on the purposes of education is as old as education itself (Noddings, 2016). Since the 1970s, many authors have categorised the varying answers to what these purposes are (Eisner & Vallance, 1974; Kliebard, 2004; McNeil, 1977; Schiro, 2013). The most recent and extensive elaboration is the work of Schiro (2013), who described four curriculum orientations:¹³ Scholar Academic, Social Efficiency, Learner Centered and Social Reconstruction. These curriculum orientations represent four schools of thought about purposes of education, which have been influential in, at least, the last 150 years. The starting point and general purpose of education for each orientation is briefly described below. The Scholar Academic orientation starts out from the knowledge of the academic disciplines, and the purpose of education is to initiate youth into society and those academic disciplines (Schiro, 2013). According to the Social Efficiency orientation, the purpose of education is to develop skills for the benefit of a “client” on multiple levels. On a concrete level, a client can refer to an employer who needs people with certain skill sets and a curriculum should help individuals develop those skills. On a more abstract level, client could refer to government and society. In relation to society, this orientation aims to promote skills and competencies that foster a constructive social and economic contribution to society. The starting point for developing a curriculum is to identify the skills and competencies deemed

13 Schiro (2013) calls them “curriculum ideologies”, while earlier elaborations, such as that of Eisner and Vallance (1974), refer to “orientations”. We use the term “orientations” because “ideology” has an oppositional connotation that does not align with our argument, namely that multiple purposes of education can coexist and enrich education.

desirable for social and economic contributions and to develop measurable learning outcomes. The Learner Centered orientation states that the purpose of education is to ensure that students achieve their full potential. Education should be connected to the students' world of experience and meet their unique physical, intellectual, social and emotional characteristics. Finally, the Social Reconstruction orientation views education as a mechanism to strive for a better society. The curriculum should entail the transfer of knowledge, skills and values that are deemed desirable in realising a good and just society. The socio-economic and environmental issues faced by society are the starting point for developing a curriculum. While these elaborations of the general purposes of education are valuable, they are also generic. In a study of teachers' teaching practices and their underlying goals for student development, Zweeris et al. (2023) found that goal systems—a visual representation of a representative lesson in terms of means and goals—can be interpreted in relation to curriculum orientations.

To provide more specificity for future research purposes and for teachers' reflections on general purposes of education, we elaborated the goal domains in relation to the curriculum orientations. Combining these two frameworks for general purposes of education resulted in an integrated framework (Table 5.1); this provides a guiding rationale offering insight into both general purposes of education and specific elaborations of goals that can be derived from their combination. The different positions in relation to curriculum orientations and goal domains are often portrayed as being mutually exclusive or requiring trade-offs. Although some of the core principles of the curriculum orientations and goal domains may not be reconcilable at the same time, education is a process that takes place over many years, in which the curriculum orientations and goal domains can co-exist meaningfully. There appears to be a tendency to exclude the ideas about purposes of education that differ from one's own ideas and preferences in this area. Thinking about purposes of education then becomes an either-or process. However, curriculum development would benefit from an approach to purposes of education where multiple ideas about these purposes can co-exist. It is therefore important to explicitly identify the general purposes

Table 5.1*The integrated framework of curriculum orientations and goal domains*

	Qualification	Socialisation	Personal development
Scholar Academic	Ways of knowing and thinking about academic disciplines. Becoming able to contribute to academic disciplines.	Initiation into society through historically developed cultural knowledge. Initiation into community of academic discipline.	Developing intellect, reasoning, thinking, reflecting, free mind.
Social Efficiency	Knowledge and skills for education and labour market. Learning goals described as observable/measurable behaviour.	Learning goals related to social/societal needs. Being able to constructively contribute to society. Desirable social behaviours.	Self-regulatory skills. Metacognitive skills. Ability to organise life in a structured and reflective manner.
Learner Centered	Adjust to student's developmental phase. Focus on student's goal in the near future. Freedom of choice for students.	Offer experiences in which democratic principles and acting democratically are practiced.	Development adapted to unique social, emotional, physical and intellectual characteristics. Development adapted to student's personal needs, interests and concerns. Self-actualisation.
Social Reconstruction	Knowledge and skills that contribute to gaining better understanding and improving society. Problem-solving skills related to addressing the issues facing society.	Transfer of desirable norms and values, often related to principles of justice and equality. Developing a desirable social orientation and social perspective, combined with desirable social values.	Young people viewed as future agents of change. Young people viewed as part of a social group, instead of just individuals. Realising potential in social interaction with others.

of education underlying education, educational policies and curricula. We also see this as crucial for enabling educational professionals to cooperate at multiple levels of curriculum development.

5.5 The rationale applied at the micro, meso and macro levels

In recent attempts to introduce curriculum reform at the national level, it was acknowledged that the process should involve educational professionals at different levels of curriculum development and with varying expertise. To meaningfully reform a curriculum at the national level, which impacts schools and classroom activities, it is important to have a shared framework that can be used in interpretation at the macro, meso and micro levels of education, and can serve as a starting point for a joint dialogue about purposes of education. The potential use of the rationale in relation to each level will be explained with examples below. First, at the micro level, we will discuss and interpret a teacher's goal system (Figure 1 below)—a visual representation of a teacher's means and goals in relation to their everyday teaching practices (Zweeris et al., 2023)—in relation to the rationale. Second, at the meso level, we will interpret two vision statements from school policy documents in relation to the rationale. Third, at the macro level, we will interpret policy documents from the Basic Skills Masterplan. It is important to note that we have no intention to judge the interpretations in terms of right or wrong. The purpose of presenting these interpretations is to demonstrate how the rationale can help with interpreting various positions in relation to curriculum development and provide a starting point for actors at multiple levels of curriculum development who are engaging in dialogue about purposes of education.

Table 5.2 shows the goals in a physics teacher's goal system (Figure 5.1, see Appendix F) and how they can be interpreted in relation to the rationale. The bottom row of the goal system shows the general sequence of activities during a representative class, while the upper rows present the teacher's answers when asked why he believes those actions and goals are important. Developing skills, such as problem-solving and self-regulation skills, that are useful for higher education and the labour market and functioning in society in general, were important goals to this teacher. During the interview the teacher said that he considered the development of useful skills more important than the course content, which was a means to develop those skills. The focus on measurable

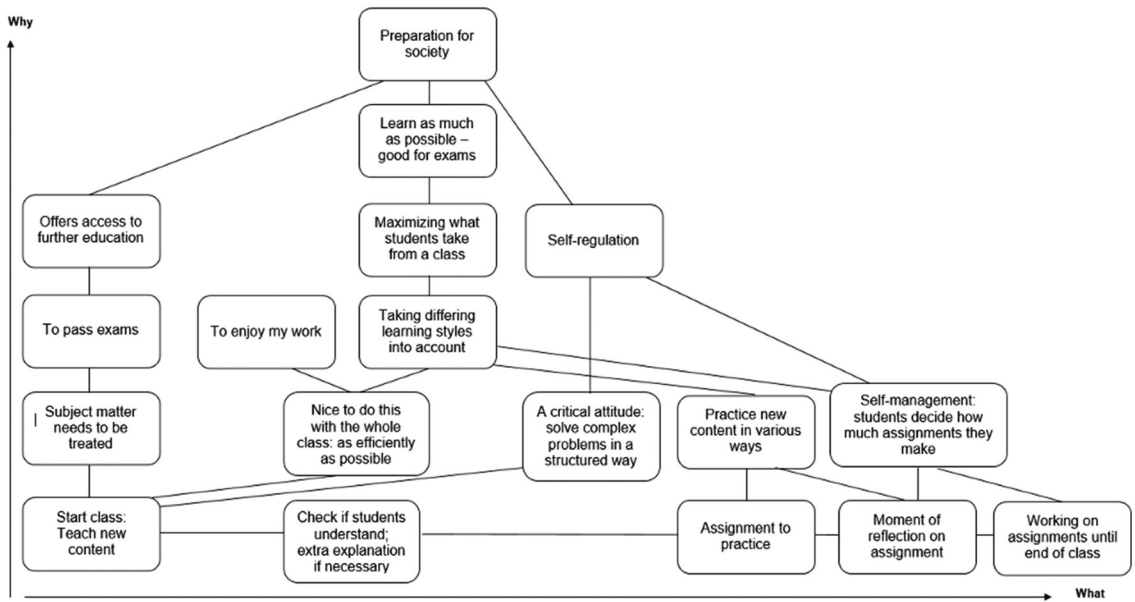


Figure 5.1
A physics teacher's goal system

Table 5.2
A physics teacher's goals in relation to the rationale

	Qualification	Socialisation	Personal development
Scholar Academic			
Social Efficiency	Preparation for society		Self-regulation
	Passing exams for entering higher education		
	Problem-solving skills		
Learner Centered			
Social Reconstruction			

Table 5.3
Interpretation of goals in school policy documents

	Qualification	Socialisation	Personal development
Scholar Academic	Broad academic development with a focus on research and critical thinking		
Social Efficiency	Digital skills, such programming skills		
Learner Centered			
Social Reconstruction		Sense of values and gaining perspective on fairness and justice, locally and internationally	Potential agents of change for the future Putting talents to service of others

skills relates to the Social Efficiency orientation, and the focus on passing exams, higher education and the labour market relates to the qualification domain.

Table 5.3 shows the goals that were derived from two school policy documents. These policy documents can serve as a useful starting point for engaging in dialogue about purposes of education. The goals shown in Table 5.3 do not represent the school’s entire vision, but are illustrative of how goals can be interpreted in relation to the rationale. It is possible that formulated goals may not relate directly to the rationale. In those cases, the rationale can be used as a starting point to further elaborate what those goals mean and why they are important. Two examples are discussed below:

“We value that our students become independent learners, thinkers and workers. They receive liberties and responsibilities, which they will learn to fill in step by step by gaining new experiences, trying out new things and taking risks.”

This quote refers to a desired development of students. It focuses on students becoming independent in relation to their liberties and responsibilities and therefore appears to relate to the personal development domain. However, the

quote does not reflect a specific curriculum orientation. Engaging in dialogue about why and how this school aims to achieve these goals, or what subgoals constitute student development in relation to each goal, may provide more insight into how the school policy documents relate to the rationale.

“Moral (identity) development and philosophy are at the core of our curriculum, just as digital skills like design and programming. Also, (artistic) expression plays an important role in our education. Moreover, we focus a significant part of our attention on metacognitive skills, such as self-management, reflection and formulating feedback questions. Consequently, we offer a curriculum that matches the needs of contemporary universities and higher vocational education.”

The final sentence of this quote refers to the qualification domain, namely that the curriculum prepares students for higher education. The other sentences appear to provide insight into how that goal is achieved. Following this reasoning, the focus on digital skills and metacognitive skills can be viewed as qualification goals, which may be connected to the Social Efficiency orientation. However, the link to that orientation cannot be made with certainty. It would therefore provide an interesting starting point to further explore these goals in relation to the rationale at the school level.

To illustrate the use of the rationale on a macro level, we interpreted policy documents about the Basic Skills Masterplan. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science recently assigned the Stichting Leerplanontwikkeling (SLO; a Dutch institute for curriculum development) the task of developing a curriculum that concretised the three goal domains. Although the assignment was broadly defined to give autonomy to those involved in the reform process, it also emphasised that the reform was bounded by the values and competencies related to the democratic rule of law. Moreover, it also stated that the curriculum reform needs to take account of what skills students should develop in relation to the future needs of society. This means that the language used by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (Ministerie van OCW, 2021) reflects a tendency towards the Social Efficiency orientation.

Table 5.4

Goals of the Basic Skills Masterplan in relation to the rationale

	Qualification	Socialisation	Personal development
Scholar Academic			
Social Efficiency	Good basic skills are crucial for further education or a job. Not just for students, but for the Netherlands in general too.	Schools need to educate children into developed citizens who possess the competencies to function in a democratic society. At its core, citizenship education contributes to the development of respect for the basic values of the democratic rule of law, and the social and societal competencies it involves.	
Learner Centered			
Social Reconstruction			

The goals shown in Table 4 were derived from three parliamentary documents: one from May 2022 (Tweede Kamer, *Kamerstukken II*, 31293, nr. 620, 2022), one from November 2022 (Tweede Kamer, *Kamerstukken II*, 31293, nr. 709, 2022) and one from February 2023 (Tweede Kamer, *Kamerstukken II*, 31293, nr. 658, 2023); and the work assignment was issued by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. In the parliamentary document of February 2023, the former Minister of Education communicates that, as a result of criticisms from the House of Representatives, the government will not define core curricular goals related to the socialisation and personal development goal domains. However, in the same document there is also an emphasis on developing citizenship skills, which are closely related to the socialisation domain of education.

The parliamentary documents were carefully studied to search for goals that may reflect other curriculum orientations, but no examples were found.

Consequently, the choices made regarding the Basic Skills Masterplan reflect, either consciously or unconsciously, a position that relates to the Social Efficiency orientation of education. On the one hand, this may be a logical consequence of the government's responsibility for developing and maintaining a coherent system of educational facilities. On the other hand, one might argue that this curriculum reform reflects a one-sided interpretation of general purposes of education.

5.6 The rationale as a starting point for engaging in dialogue about purposes of education

In the previous section we illustrated how the rationale can be used to interpret educational goals on multiple levels. Using the proposed rationale to explicitly identify the general purposes underlying these goals provides two opportunities for engaging in dialogue about purposes of education. First, it can be the starting point for dialogue on each level of curriculum development separately. Central to these reflections are the various positions in the rationale that are represented and how these insights may inform the further development of education and the curriculum.

Teachers can be supported in this reflective process with the use of goal systems and how they relate to the rationale. In addition, the rationale offers an opportunity to consider alternatives and how teaching practices may be adapted or enriched to reflect other positions within the rationale. A similar process can be initiated at the school level. School policy documents can be used to provide insight into a school's position in relation to the rationale, and this positioning can then be used as a starting point for discussions between teachers and school leaders about the goals underlying their curriculum. Together, they can evaluate whether they are satisfied with their curriculum or feel the need to also focus on other positions within the rationale. Finally, the rationale may also provide the government with the opportunity to reflect on the underlying assumptions that are reflected in their educational policies and curriculum reform assignments.

Are they aware of the potentially one-sided focus of their policies? If so, what are their thoughts on the tension between government control on the one hand, and—on the other hand—the constitutional “freedom of education” and the challenges experienced by schools in developing a curriculum that reflects a balance between the three goal domains?

A second opportunity offered by the interpretations is the possibility to initiate a dialogue about general purposes between actors from various levels of curriculum development. The tables show that the goals derived from micro, meso and macro levels of curriculum development reflect both differences and similarities. Making those positions explicit may contribute to a mutual understanding in relation to the task of curriculum development and the complex interplay between the micro, meso and macro levels.

5.7 The way forward: Offering autonomy and guidance, without being prescriptive

There have been many pleas for a broader understanding of good education in recent years. The question of the purpose of education has received many different answers, each of which has its own merits and valuable starting points for developing a curriculum. The scientific curriculum committee (Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie, 2023) argued that the three goal domains should be used as a rationale for curriculum reforms. However, this rationale has been suggested before (Biesta, 2010; Onderwijsraad, 2013) and attempts were made to include the goal domains in recent curriculum reform processes. Schools and teachers found it difficult to develop a curriculum based on the abstract rationale proposed by the curriculum committee, and consequently no satisfactory progress was made.

In a position paper on this issue, Van Rees (2021) argued that the government has become increasingly prescriptive in relation to citizenship education policies. The parliamentary documents revealed the government’s conflicted position about prescribing socialisation and personal development goals on the one

hand, and the increasingly prescriptive curricular goals related to citizenship development on the other hand. A potential pitfall of not providing schools with guidance in relation to a broad understanding of good education is that the government will become more prescriptive in the future. Given the one-sided focus that became apparent when we interpreted the Basic Skills Masterplan in relation to the rationale proposed in this position paper, it is questionable whether the government will propose a curriculum that reflects a broad conception of good education; one with which the actors at multiple levels of curriculum development and implementation will agree.

