



# From Political Intentions to a New Curriculum

Summary of Report no. 4

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## Summary of Report no. 4

This report presents a research-based evaluation of the reform known as the Curriculum Renewal (LK20<sup>1</sup> in Norwegian) and the connections between its intentions and its final and approved versions. The Curriculum Renewal is the name given to the process of developing and introducing new subject curricula in the Knowledge Promotion Reform curriculum (LK06). The new curriculum was enacted in August 2020. This report builds on and extends analyses previously published on the evaluation of the Curriculum Renewal (Karseth, Kvamme & Ottesen, 2020).

This report begins with an overview of relevant Norwegian and international research on diverse themes connected to curriculum reforms in general and the Curriculum Renewal specifically. Such research contributes insights into and critical perspectives on its fundamental concepts, policy ideas and problem statements. Several reviewed Norwegian studies were oriented towards practices and indicated that subject-specific subject curricula were somewhat indistinct. Several of the studies contributed frameworks and proposals that the teaching profession can apply in practice and use as convenient resources for research-based knowledge as a foundation when schools engage in plans and strategies.

The theoretical framework of this report draws on theories on implementing and steering curriculum reforms, perspectives on how we can understand the inner consistency of the curriculum and analytical approaches to issues that pertain to fundamental values and democracy. Together with didactics, these components constitute the underlying knowledge base. The Curriculum Renewal reflects ambitions, problem areas and solutions that we find in educational policies in several countries. At the same time, the Curriculum Renewal as a political project must be understood in the Norwegian context regarding reform activities, attitudes and approaches to governance and the relations between the profession and the state.

The analyses in this report draw on data primarily comprised of official LK20-related documents and supporting material in the form of a ‘competence package’ for teachers. The documents comprise steering documents approved by the Ministry of Education, government and Parliament. The white paper, Meld. St. 28 (2015–2016), including data on how it was received and operationalised, is a key document. Additionally, governance documents approved by the Ministry of Education, such as guidelines, strategies and the authorised LK20

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<sup>1</sup> In this summary, the acronym LK20 includes both the Norwegian and the Sami curricula (LK20S).

curriculum, constitute the data corpus. Additional data are found in memos and letters from the Ministry and the Directorate for Education and Training. Analysis of vital supporting material accompanying the implementation of the Curriculum Renewal adds to the total data corpus.

While there is a diversity of such support material, we specifically focused our analysis on the ‘competence package’ *Implementing a new curriculum (the Curriculum Renewal)*. We conducted 21 interviews with key informants from the participants/parties involved, groups that specifically worked with core elements and subject curricula and representatives from the policy–administrative levels. These interviews were conducted during spring 2020 and analysed in the first preliminary report (Karseth et al., 2020). The interviews constituted an important database for the analyses in this report.

### **Value promotion, interdisciplinary themes and deep learning in the face of societal challenges**

We examined how the relationship between school and society, which is a vital theme in didactic theory, plays out in the Curriculum Renewal. Policy documents leading up to the reform emphasise crucial challenges for society. These challenges constitute important premises for changing the curriculum and are significant for the introduction of interdisciplinary topics. This priority is part of a larger context involving value promotion and, thus, the formative mandate in education. Through these analyses, a complex picture emerges. It is striking how vaguely the societal challenges are described when identified in the interdisciplinary topics. Still, regarding public health, life skills, democracy and citizenship, a distinct picture emerges. Public health and life skills are linked to identity formation, while democracy and citizenship are consistently linked to participation and societal commitment. These persistent challenges are made currently relevant to mental health and handling conflicts and extremism. Sustainable development is connected to climate and environmental challenges, but these descriptions are diverse. Considerations of global justice, emphasised in the UN’s agenda for sustainable development, are just vaguely articulated.

A distinct topic in the digital version of the curriculum was the connection between interdisciplinary themes and competence goals. Here, we found substantial differences between school subjects, and we identified several strategies for making connections. Our analysis found that the theme of sustainable development is only weakly anchored in school subjects, such as

Norwegian religion, philosophies of life and ethics, compared to the tighter connections seen in the subjects of natural and social sciences.

We also studied value promotion as a modification of fundamental values in schooling. The most important aspect is how reformulations of the common values in the mission statement in the core curriculum is further rephrased in the sections on values in individual school subjects. One striking example is how certain values in need of further qualification from more fundamental values are present, while several other common values from the mission statement are not articulated. This may represent a weakening of the core values as resources for critique, which may have implications for the formative dimensions of schooling and work with vital societal challenges.

Finally, we discuss deep learning as a key concept in the Curriculum Renewal, showing how deep learning has been strengthened through value promotion. At the same time, the clear disciplinary framing of deep learning, values and interdisciplinary themes appears as a constraint when facing crises and challenges that transcend a single discipline.

### **Core elements in the framework of a competence-based curriculum**

The term ‘core element’, which was introduced in the white paper Meld. St. 28 (2015–2016), represents an important response to the political intention of a curriculum with distinct disciplinary content. Subject teams began developing core elements within separate school subjects before the curriculum development teams began their work. The implication is that already approved core elements constituted an important premise for how the separate subject curricula were developed.

By developing the core elements first, we can say that governance was exercised through meetings, teamwork and rounds of input, hearings and writing. This placed individual school subjects’ characteristics and basic structures together with the understanding that knowledge is intimately linked to competence. At the same time, our analyses show that the extensive work on the core elements was somehow moved behind the competence goals in terms of the work that all curriculum and subject curricula teams should address. Further, the preliminary work done by the core element teams should not be prescriptive for the work undertaken by the curriculum and subject curricula teams. This also made it possible to disregard the work that explicitly linked core elements to specific grades.

## **Unity and consistency in the Curriculum Renewal**

One important political intention with the Curriculum Renewal was to contribute to stronger consistency in the curriculum. Connective elements were found in value promotion, the continuation of basic skills and the introduction of interdisciplinary themes representing crucial societal challenges. While the analyses in our first report (Karseth et al., 2020) showed how the Curriculum Renewal materialises in a zone of friction between subject-specific and interdisciplinary considerations, in the present report, we show how the digital version of the curriculum is tasked with increasing the inner consistency of the curriculum. To achieve this, the Directorate for Education and Training opted for a digital curriculum that invites readers to understand the curriculum in certain ways by offering pre-set links and connections. Thus, the digital curriculum prescribes how certain associations and relations appear to the reader. The clickable structure results in certain context-free blocks of text appearing on the screen. This may, however, result in a fragmented representation, which appears as a paradox when the intention is to create inner consistency. The extent to which this is the case is an empirical question.

## **Guiding and supporting the Curriculum Renewal**

One topic in the evaluation is supporting material, either developed or commissioned by the Directorate for Education and Training and connected to the implementation of the Curriculum Renewal and the application of the curriculum. The intentions, as they appear in the governance papers from the Ministry of Education, form the backdrop of our analyses. In the competence package, *Implementing a new curriculum (the Curriculum Renewal)*, we identified several tensions, with one being how the resources offer a balance between a limitation and an expansion of a space for professional interpretation. We found that competence packages often reduce interpretative space instead of motivating the promotion of diverse opinions and exploring topics in terms of research-based knowledge. The modules that constitute the competence package invite the users to reflect on their experiential knowledge, but seldom refer to additional sources of knowledge.

Our analyses identified tensions between the curriculum as a legal document, the profession's available space for action and the supporting material offered by the Directorate of Education

and Training. This particular tension is elaborated on in the present report, where we regard the curriculum as a tool for governance. We draw attention to the vital role of the Directorate for Education and Training as a developer of resources for professional development. Such resources are digital, often interactive and easily accessible. We question to what extent the Directorate for Education and Training, through these resources, emerges as an authoritative interpreter of issues that traditionally reside with the profession and thus comes close to the role of political actor. Given that guides, tools for planning and curriculum texts all inhabit the same online platform, what constitutes legal documents and what is open for professional judgment may appear ambiguous. In addition, there is a risk that the user-friendliness of supporting resources could outshine the need for reflection and deliberation in the professional communities found in schools.