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Understanding Teaching the Mother Tongue: Explorations in Historical and International Comparison

Sjaak Kroon and Jan Sturm

1. Introduction

1.1. A gap between rhetoric and practice

In a case study carried out at a school for primary education in The Netherlands (six to twelve-year-olds), we interviewed and observed a 'good' teacher working wholeheartedly together with curriculum developers at a project on mother tongue education. First of all, this project, established by the National Institute for Curriculum Development, aims at an innovation of subject content in mother tongue education in ordinary classroom practice. One could say, in rather abstract and analytic terms, that the project focuses on integrating language art skills across the whole curriculum. The emphasis is on the functional aspects of language teaching and learning. On the one hand, fostering effective communicative behaviour in everyday life (defined as an important aspect of social competency) is aimed at. On the other hand, developing language proficiency is considered a means to facilitate the total learning process at school. The intentions of the project members, including the teachers participating in one way or another, obviously are related to a child-centred ethos (cf. Sharp and Green 1975, 166), to more recently developed theories on language, language in use and communication in general (cf. Doughty 1974; Martin et al. 1976; Shafer 1985) and to a more or less progressive pedagogical and social ideology (cf. Sharp and Green 1975, 224; Mathieson 1975, 143-164), which, in the words of Masemann, is related to "the long history of progressivism in English education" (Masemann 1982, 7).

Although it is difficult to make valid generalizations on the practice of Dutch teaching in The Netherlands, the results of a series of surveys (e.g. Damhuis et al. 1983; Kroon 1985) show that at the majority of Dutch schools another approach is dominant. Buttressed by impressionistic observations as a teacher-trainer one could interpret those results by characterizing this approach as a deeply rooted concern with, what in everyday classroom practice appear to be, surface characteristics such as spelling and punctuation. Hardcore activities such as sentence analysis and comprehension and vocabulary exercises and so on are favoured.

The case study was carried out in the broader context of a research of Dutch curricula, designed and put into practice during the last decade at a number of Dutch schools, ranging from primary and secondary education to further education. The purpose of this research was, first and foremost, to provide more or less detailed descriptions of different innovative Dutch courses taught at different schools, including the teachers' account

of their actual practice. It was expected that various versions of (innovative) practice in mother tongue education (cf. Barnes et al. 1984), could be identified. At the same time, according to for instance Sharp and Green (1975) and Ball and Lacey (1980), it was assumed that several types of teachers' explanations or legitimations could be found, related to their educational aims in general and their more specific subject-centred purposes and implicit theories in particular. Furthermore, it was supposed that practice and legitimations would prove not to be randomly interchangeable. Both practice and legitimations were conceived of as being based on so called 'epistemological views' (Young 1981, 140), which were expected to be rather well-considered and elaborated. In this context 'epistemological views' are restricted to subject-oriented and/or pedagogical views. In a broader sense Young (1981, 123) defines "the study of (teachers') epistemologies (as opposed to the study of epistemology)" to be "the study of the way in which experience is transformed, of the different styles whereby knowledge is constituted, and the anchorage of such styles in the existential projects and intentionality of members of particular formations".

By analyzing the material collected, we hope to be able to come to a deeper understanding of the failure of various attempts at innovation, especially in the field of mother tongue education. Numerous publications devoted to educational research all over the world have documented this resistance to educational innovation (cf. Fullan 1981). Nevertheless, little is said on how to understand the underlying processes, at least in terms of subject matter content. Our research, in other words, is directed towards discovering the constraints, material and ideological, which block curriculum innovation (Hammersley and Hargreaves 1983, 6).

Returning to the case study itself: it was designed in the fairly recent tradition of the ethnography of schooling (Hammersley 1983; Hammersley and Hargreaves 1983; Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Goetz and LeCompte 1984). Consequently, the emphasis was on ethnographic interviewing (Spradley 1979), participant observation (Spradley 1980) and (content) analysis of educational documents (Walker 1985, 64-65). The teacher interviewed appeared to be rather competent as regards formulating his innovative intentions and the related adequate 'theories', especially in the field of mother tongue teaching in general, and their implications for practice. In his case we were searching for the characteristics of writing instruction, writing assignments, writing guidance and the assessment of children's written work in the context of the curriculum project he was participating in. In the first, non-directive interview the teacher seemed to maintain an almost deadly silence on these topics, although he was well informed about the focus of our research. Therefore, we felt compelled to examine rather directly and in detail his rationale for developing writing abilities in children and for his actual purposes. Urged by our questions in the more structured interviews which followed, he revealed notions like 'the writer's sense of audience' and 'the pupils' intentions as writers'. He emphasized the importance of the context of work in the classroom and the broader one of the out-of-school life as shared with the teacher and classmates, the necessity of attractively displaying children's writing and so on. At the same time he alluded to apparent problems in putting these 'theoretical' notions into practice.

Obviously, his accounting system (Sharp and Green 1975, 166) appeared to comprise a good deal of the innovative rhetoric of the project as reflected in the project publications available; nevertheless, for one reason or another, he was rather reticent about reporting that rhetoric.

As a matter of fact, his substantive practice as registered in our detailed classroom observations, which were acknowledged and authorized by him without any problem, seemed to demonstrate rather different concerns. With regard to his teaching of writing, especially considering his writing guidance in more or less informal contexts, but also in his writing instruction, his attention, albeit more concealed, was primarily directed to surface criteria for traditionally acceptable composing: length (equally a massive problem for the pupils, as their verbal interaction showed), presentation, paragraphs, spelling and punctuation. Even if, in the course of classroom action, it appeared unavoidable to approach more or less deep criteria - in his accounting system labelled as communicative aspects of writing - he obviously found it very difficult to say anything likely to be of value to his pupils. (Here, it should be acknowledged that we did not find almost any operational indication how to care for feedback in a communicative approach in the documents we analyzed.)

As far as deeper criteria seemed to be at work in his writing lessons, they seemed most probably derived from his own experience as a pupil. As evidenced in our reconstruction of his life history, unlike his present ideas on teaching writing formulated within a communicative conception, his experiences in learning to write were related to an established practice of Dutch teaching, likely based on a 'liberal arts' conception. Within that conception learning to write globally means observing classical-rhetorical prescripts, diluted in the course of time, and reproducing vague, rhetorical examples, as such beyond recognition for an average teacher and/or pupil. To make a long story short, in our case study we were confronted with a gap between the rhetoric of teaching writing as reflected in the teacher's interviews and the 'reality' of teaching and learning to write, as documented in our classroom observations (cf. Hoozeveld and Verkamp 1985, for an extensive report on the case study).

1.2. Aspects of an interpretative framework

The general gap between a teacher's accounting system and his (substantive) practice, which has meanwhile been richly documented in other educational research, was interpreted by Sharp and Green in the Mapledene case first and foremost as a means of maintaining social control and commitment to the underlying political structure of staff relationships. In spite of justifiable criticism of their research (Hammersley 1977), we do think their interpretation accounts for important aspects of the problem. Nevertheless, in the case of mother tongue education, especially with regard to innovative attempts at subject content, this interpretation does not provide for a fully adequate understanding of the laborious and hanging process of changing educational practice, even when the rhetoric has already been changed. In our interpretation - based on the theoretical set-up developed, among others, by Hammersley (1977) and on the empirical research in the field of mother tongue education by Ball and Lacey (1980) and Ball (1981, 1982, 1983 and 1984), as far as subject matter content is concerned, the 'gap' has to be interpreted first and foremost in terms of conflicting subject paradigms (Ball and Lacey 1980, 174), generated in different historical periods and different cultural spheres and carried over to our present time and cultures by intricate processes of cultural transfer (cf. Knight 1980).

According to Kuhn's epistemology, an educational paradigm, i.e. a paradigm of mother tongue teaching, refers to a view of subject matter content, in terms of topics, activities and legitimations (cf. Reid 1984) which is

shared by both (educational) experts (such as linguists, literati, educationalists) and practitioners, banding together in a loosely organized educational community. As members of the same paradigmatic community they share common values, assumptions, goals, norms, language, beliefs and ways of perceiving and understanding the educational process, i.e. the process of mother tongue education. According to the proposal of Tuthill and Ashton (1983, 9) the term "educational paradigm" refers "to a paradigmatic view of the world that is shared by both educational scientists and practitioners", whereas the related term "educational community" refers "to those educational scientists, teacher educators, and classroom teachers who share a common paradigmatic view of the educational process". As Ball and Lacey have shown in their research on mother tongue education, one can distinguish several paradigms of mother tongue education historically, one of them being more or less dominant in a given period, and/or in a given (sub)culture, the others being at best an alternative or, at worst, nearly invisible. Furthermore, Ball and Lacey defined a school, and more specifically the English department, as an arena where among teachers several paradigms of mother tongue education are negotiated mainly around two fundamental questions: What ought to be done in mother tongue education? and What can be done, given the actual circumstances?

Taking the notion of conflicting paradigms as a starting-point, we interpret a gap between a teacher's accounting system and his substantive practice as a gap between two competing paradigms. For instance, in our case study, the innovative paradigm as proclaimed and supported by the curriculum project is primarily a source for answering the 'ought'-question, and, perhaps, for changing the answer to the 'can'-question, while the paradigm internalized by the teacher during his secondary and professional socialization governs his classroom practice, albeit on a rather unconscious level.

In order to elaborate this tentatively developed interpretative framework and at the same time to determine its potential for understanding the complexities of teaching the mother tongue, it will be clear that ethnographic research of schooling has to be complemented by historical research on the one hand (Goodson and Ball 1984; Ball and Goodson 1983; Smith 1984). On the other hand, comparative research can reveal the specificity of culturally bound perspectives on mother tongue teaching (Herrlitz and Peterse 1984). So, by means of detailed analysis of the history of mother tongue teaching within and across several (national) and (sub)cultural areas, materials can be collected which may provide an answer to the rather interesting research question: What paradigms of mother tongue education are to be reconstructed so as to account for the very complicated situation in mother tongue education. As Barnes et al. (1984, 380) conclude in their last chapter of *Versions of English*: "Empirical reality in education is chary for lending itself to simplification: the teaching we saw varied in complex ways which could not all be accounted for. Although in schools we were able to locate five tendencies which we called 'versions', few teachers could be allocated unambiguously to one or another without misrepresentation".

Nobody will expect us to answer this question thoroughly in the remainder of this paper. We limit ourselves here to giving a short description of three paradigms, which we have reconstructed provisionally, on the basis of an analysis of Dutch publications on mother tongue teaching since the sixties (section 2). The emphasis will be on the so-called literary-

grammatical paradigm; the two alternatives will be sketched mainly with reference to this one.

In section 3 we report on the results of an international conference devoted to mother tongue teaching in nine European countries. Some evidence for the existence of comparable paradigms is presented.

2. Reconstructing paradigms by historical analysis

2.1. A literary-grammatical paradigm

The starting point of our description of the literary-grammatical and dominant paradigm is a quotation from a well-known, albeit rather old-fashioned handbook on mother tongue education in The Netherlands: "And his (the teacher's) high aim is to open their (the pupils') ears and hearts to the beauty of the language of the common people in all its variety and of the language of writers they may look up to. In short: he is pre-eminently the man who leads the young to the richness of our national culture and makes them participate in that culture" (Van Dis et al. 1962, 8). In our opinion, this quotation expresses the essence of the traditional paradigm very well, though we have to be quick to add that we are obviously within the realm of the most idealistic rhetoric here. The writers of this passage realize this, when they remark that "the subject of Dutch (...) has such a high purpose, in the abstract, but its substance is so hard to define" (ib., 13). Important goals which can be traced to this view of mother tongue teaching are personal development in and through growth in language and an active as well as a passive command of the mother tongue. Although both goals are considered to be intimately connected, the former is mainly associated with the teaching of literature and style and with the more literary or essayistic forms of written work, whereas the latter, on the basis of, among other things, expectations concerning the future role of the pupils in society, is associated with speaking and listening and the more practical, matter-of-fact ways of working with texts. In the most extreme realization of this paradigm, found in those forms of secondary education which prepare their pupils for university, the mother tongue teacher is an academic scholar, trained at university, whose role is an autocratic one. He sets the standards in a pedagogically responsible manner.

In this conception, the pupil is a novice; hence the pressing question: "How to guide a 14-year old boy, with his dull sense of language and his weak powers of expression toward a precision in his utterances which is not, and may never be, his own?" (ib., 13). It is the teacher's task to nurse and develop "a faculty which at first is primitive, but which can be developed" (ib., 8). There is little uncertainty as to the future social role of the pupils: a leading function in society.

In general, the development of children appears to follow a fixed, predictable pattern, which makes it possible to prescribe clearly the subject matter to be taught to each age-group. The teacher often appeals to the eagerness of the pupils to outdo their fellow-pupils. If all goes well, the teaching-learning process proceeds according to rather strict rules. Finally, schooling seems to be mainly for boys...

In the literary-grammatical paradigm there is a strong link between the academic discipline of Dutch language and literature and the subject matter taught at schools.

In the rhetorics of this paradigm the emphasis is on the teaching of

literature with the help of literary texts, both historical and modern. Apart from this, some attention is also given to the teaching of language skills. The traditional opposition to the dominant role of written language in mother tongue teaching is also encountered in this paradigm. In connection with this, the importance of the spoken language is emphasized. A lot of attention is given to the structure of the language, and little to its use, except where the use of language by the pupils themselves is concerned. In such cases the approach to language use is normative and formal. Mastery of the standard language is an important goal of mother tongue teaching. The subject, essentially a diluted version of the academic discipline of Dutch, occupies the central position, though there is certainly some concern for the well-being of the pupil. The teacher plays an extremely important role in the teaching-learning process: he is the expert, with respect to subject as well as to method (pedagogics). Making the individual child the centre of attention is regarded as an ideal, but one that, on practical grounds, is unattainable. The unassailable position in mother tongue education of the schoolbook is hardly questioned. Mother tongue teaching is conceived of as a narrowly defined subject, though its fundamental role in the teaching of other subjects is recognized ("it helps - perhaps we should say: enables - (...) the pupils to study other subjects" (ib., 87)); however, this does not seem to have any further consequences for discussing integrated curricula.

So far we have given a rather rough outline of the literary-grammatical paradigm. Apart from its highly cultural and societal status, due to historical processes which have to be passed over in this paper (cf. Matthijssen 1982), the impact of this paradigm on the current teachers' language of accountability seems undeniable, brought about as it is by its inescapable reproduction by teacher training institutions in general (cf. Grace 1978 in general and Ball and Lacey 1980 related to English teaching). Furthermore to a great extent the relation between this paradigm and traditional practice is taken for granted and therefore hardly amenable to critical reflection. Nevertheless, at least a successful transformation of this language of accountability seems to be a necessary, albeit not a sufficient condition for practical change. Even if, with regard to the so-called paradigmatic component (Hammersley 1977), the language of accountability appears to have changed, the substantive practice possibly remains intact, being legitimized in a more or less unconscious way by the old paradigm (as is documented in our case studies; cf. e.g. Hoogeveen and Verkampen 1985). To innovate practice successfully it seems to be insufficient to provide a new paradigm; it is more likely, that one has to eradicate the old one in one way or another.

2.2. Alternative paradigms

2.2.1. Communicative mother tongue education

The paradigm of communicative mother tongue education seems to be a reaction to two phenomena.

First of all, during the seventies, the Dutch government, under the influence of social developments and the views of a social-democratic Minister of Education, formulated as an important goal of education that it should produce citizens who are better able to articulate their views and opinions and who are able to participate in democratic decision-making on all levels, from local community centre to parliament. Within the framework of mother tongue teaching, this ability to articulate one's views is

often conceived of as developing critical language skills. In other words: the pupils have to learn not to let themselves be taken in.

Simultaneously, the research into language proficiency - itself to some extent a product of the struggle for democratization - and, most of all, communication theories provided the concepts necessary to develop communicative mother tongue teaching. The transmitter-message-receiver communication model (now regarded as rather naive) became the basis for mother tongue teaching. Primarily when producing language, the pupil has to be conscious of whatever he wishes to achieve through his communicative act. At the same time he has to know the audience and the strategies which might serve him in trying to achieve his aims. With respect to receptive skills, the main objective is to enable the pupils to put up resistance to the enormous flow of information which threatens to overwhelm them. In order to be able to do so, they have to learn to detect the intentions of the 'transmitter', the producer of the message, and to decide for themselves whether or not they agree with them.

Communicative mother tongue teaching endeavours to develop the following skills:

- debating skills (instead of the short talk which was labelled socially irrelevant);
- goal and audience-directed writing (instead of written composition, which, from a communicative perspective, was discarded as of no value);
- critical receptive skills, in particular the ability to read and watch TV in a critical way (i.e. a critical attitude to the mass media).

Within the communicative paradigm special attention is given to fictional texts (the term 'literature' with all its highbrow associations is avoided): the writer of fiction, too, is a 'transmitter' with a message which can be decoded by a critical analysis of the text. The concepts used in the communicative approach to fictional texts were borrowed from the fields of structural analysis, the sociology of literature and, at a later stage, esthetics. In our view, the communicative paradigm of mother tongue teaching has made the greatest progress with respect to the development of its rhetorics; on the rhetorical level it probably constitutes the most explicit attack of the literary-grammatical paradigm (cf. Kroon 1985). Combining forces in order to counter successfully, the new rhetoric not only incorporates several innovative attempts initiated by a diversity of subject matter interests, but also compromises with as many high status components of the old paradigm as possible.

2.2.2. Thematic mother tongue education

A third paradigm worth describing in this context can be labelled as the paradigm of thematic mother tongue education. This paradigm is the basis for the curriculum project which, among other things, is the subject of our research. In this conception, mother tongue teaching is as much as possible integrated into other subjects ('themes', since a variety of (school)subjects contribute to their content). At the same time, the necessity to practise specific language skills in separate courses is recognized. The relation between the thematic courses and the separate language courses is a much disputed one, especially with regard to the time spent on the two elements and the extent to which they are separated. As far as its view of language teaching is concerned, this paradigm is probably closest to the views held by the adherents of communicative mother tongue teaching. In the latter concept, communication is central; in the former, the theme. This theoretical difference in emphasis leads to more essential differences in practice as proclaimed, for instance, with

respect to school subject-boundaries, which in thematic teaching have disappeared altogether.

A concrete example: within the theme "Indians" (very common in today's schoolbooks for mother tongue education) various language activities - apart from other subjects, such as history, geography, social studies - find a place: reading, speaking/listening (interviews, debates, stories, etc.), writing (learning by doing). If during these language activities certain language defects show up (e.g. concerning the spelling of verb forms), special attention can be given to this subject, either within the theme or outside it, in special courses.

The use of the term thematic teaching is not limited to ideas concerning Dutch teaching alone. What we are concerned with here, is a general educational principle concerning the organization and presentation of subject matter, developed mainly for the benefit of pupils who perform badly in traditional schools or types of education: working-class children in big cities, children speaking dialects or non-standard Dutch, children attending lower vocational schools, etc. The idea behind this is that these pupils are demotivated by the organization of education in separate subjects, and that thematic work offers an excellent opportunity to relate the learning activities directly to the experiences of the children and to the world in which they live.

3. Paradigms in an international perspective

3.1. Introduction

In the preceding sections we have shown the existence of a relationship between, on the one hand, the way in which teachers in everyday classroom practice shape their mother tongue teaching and account for it in terms of rhetoric, and, on the other hand, developments, i.e. successive paradigms, in the history of mother tongue education. The case study teacher presenting himself on a rhetorical level as a representative of one of the newer paradigms in mother tongue education (i.e. the communicative paradigm), while in his actual teaching practice primarily the dominant so-called literary-grammatical paradigm predominates, can be looked upon as one manifestation of the problematic character of educational innovation of subject content in terms of the gap between rhetorics and practice. The ideas that teachers have (and, when asked, explicitly express) about their classroom activities as they themselves perceive them, can be important barriers for educational innovation. A combination of historical research (cf. Sturm 1986a) and school-ethnographic case studies in (the practice of) mother tongue education seems to be a promising approach in order to get hold of the hitherto somewhat mysterious process of educational innovation.

A comparison between the results of historical research in paradigm shift in the rhetoric of mother tongue education in The Netherlands, as presented in section 2, and the accounts on the recent history of mother tongue education in nine European countries - as discussed at an international conference organised by the International Mother Tongue Education Network; Veldhoven, The Netherlands, December 1983¹ - shows that in this case we are not dealing with an exclusively Dutch phenomenon (cf. Herrlitz et al. 1984a).

3.2. Difficulties in discussing mother tongue education from an international perspective

If one tries to look at mother tongue education from an international perspective, one is likely to discover that the debate on research and curriculum development in this field only marginally crosses the boundaries of language areas or cultural communities, often national states. The development of general and therefore international theories and concepts, which is common in other scientific fields, has scarcely started in the field of mother tongue education. As a result, attempts to initiate an international discussion on mother tongue education have generally met with relatively little success. This seems to be at least partly due to the fact that, though on the surface much in the field of mother tongue education seems similar, if not identical, below this surface, the meaning and function of apparently general concepts are to a large extent culture-specific and may differ considerably from country to country - sometimes without the participants in the discussion even realizing this. This state of affairs is of course bound to hamper a fruitful exchange of views considerably.

This situation may be illustrated by the example of grammar teaching. Traditional grammar, modelled on the classical tradition, plays an important role in mother tongue teaching in Europe. Almost as universal as its existence is the criticism of the role of traditional grammar in mother tongue education. In spite of these similarities, however, an international comparative discussion on traditional grammar teaching and its criticism runs into terminological and conceptual difficulties. In the Federal Republic of Germany for example, the innovative concept "Reflexion über Sprache" (Reflection on Language or Language Study) has a place within the framework of "Grammatikunterricht" (Grammar Teaching) and is basically an attempt to broaden the concept of grammar teaching and to dissociate it from its classical models. In The Netherlands, on the other hand, the term "Grammatica" (Grammar) in recent discussions almost invariably refers to traditional grammar or syntax, and is associated with activities like parsing. In the Dutch context, therefore, the equivalent (more or less) of "Reflexion über Sprache", "Taalbeschouwing", could hardly be regarded as one element of the larger subject of grammar teaching, as it is in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Parallels between concepts in mother tongue education, such as "grammatica", "grammar", "Grammatik" and so on, which, notwithstanding their similarity, mean different things in different countries suggest a degree of homogeneity which in reality does not exist in mother tongue education, whether we look at its contents, its pedagogical traditions, the sciences it draws upon, or the circumstances under which it takes place. This apparent homogeneity conceals, in fact, the basic problems involved in an international discussion on mother tongue education. In general, mother tongue education is to a large extent culture-specific and embedded in the values and traditions of the national culture. Therefore, an international discussion must go hand in hand with an intimate knowledge of the nature of the interconnection between culture and mother tongue education in each country involved (Herrlitz and Peterse 1984).

3.3. A provisional overview of comparable paradigms in mother tongue education in Europe

For the Veldhoven conference, the IMEN correspondents were asked to

describe the state of the art in mother tongue education in their country during the last ten years or so in terms of current or dominant paradigms and competing, innovative paradigms. Therefore, the opposition between traditional and innovative views on mother tongue education, as far as they are current in the rhetorics of this field, forms the heart of most of the reports delivered.

The discussion at the conference showed that the stages of development or tendencies in the rhetoric of mother tongue education in Europe, as reflected in the reports, could, in fact, generally be described in terms of a traditional stage of development or concept of mother tongue education (a so-called canonical or dominant situation or paradigm) and several innovative lines of development leading away from it. The following historical development or paradigm shift - admittedly stated in rather crude terms - seems to have been taking place in almost all countries under investigation (with the possible exception of Turkey; cf. Göğüs 1984 and Aksan 1984).

Around 1965 a 'canonical situation' dominated mother tongue education in Europe. This situation or paradigm had the following characteristics:

- teaching practices in all schools and at all levels were modelled on mother tongue teaching in the highest grades of the classical gymnasium or grammar school;
- mother tongue education was primarily literary education; central to it was the literary canon which was traditionally accepted as the cultural heritage in the respective speech communities;
- complementary to the teaching of literature, a form of grammar (i.e. parsing) was taught which was modelled on classical grammar;
- in all systems of mother tongue education, a basic form of written composition was taught, which, typically, was unrelated to forms of written communication normally used in society.

Around 1970 this dominant paradigm came under attack from progressive educationalists throughout Europe. This attack on traditional teaching concepts and methods, which went on more or less unhampered by cultural contexts or socio-political counter-forces, created a need for reform everywhere. Though the traditional situation was to some extent broken up it was not replaced by a new canonical situation. It would be nearer the truth to speak of a number of currents of innovation, which engendered political and educational debates and controversies and which finally led to more or less far-reaching reforms. One of these currents of innovation, which in one form or another is present in almost all the countries under investigation, is the so-called communicative paradigm. It is precisely this paradigm which predominates in the language of accountability of our case study teacher (cf. section 1.1).

Incidentally, at present there are indications in some countries for another change in the field of mother tongue education, set in the context of a return towards a more conservative political and social climate in Europe. The slogan of this change seems to be 'Back to basics', meaning back to basic skills (in language proficiency) as the major concern of mother tongue education, and away from progressivism (cf. Sharp and Green 1975 and Masemann 1982) and concerns with emancipation and social issues which are supposed to lead to declining standards and illiteracy. It is hard to say at the moment to what extent this movement is, or is going to be, a general trend, and whether it will lead us back to the canonical situation of the sixties.

4. Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the present paper does not allow for far-reaching conclusions: developing an interpretative framework is not the same thing as shaping a shared understanding of the intricacies of teaching a mother tongue in practice, nor is it the same thing as bridging the gap between rhetoric and practice.

As a matter of fact, ethnographic research on schooling, be it historical or/and comparative in character, cannot meet a need for nomothetic knowledge and related 'if-then'-advice. It aims at communicative understanding as a basis for communicative action. In our Dutch research on innovative curriculum development in mother tongue teaching, the notion of historically defined competing subject paradigms, which are active within and across teachers, developers and researchers, appears to afford understanding of what is happening in classrooms. At least, that seems to be a possibility to, jointly, coming to grips with classroom reality, as perceived by the participants.

As to IMEN, one could say that the discussion on the interpretative framework appears to generate energy which allows for further research.

At this point, however, we cannot pretend that our research has opened a new avenue of research on mother tongue education. Maybe it is suitable to finish our paper by quoting two rather optimistic, be it serious, observations on ethnographic, historical and comparative research on mother tongue education.

"Taken together, the techniques of history and ethnography can provide us with the tools to examine and interrogate school subjects empirically and may also lay the groundwork for the development of theories which capture and explain the processes of change (or absence of change) in school subjects. (...) Historical work concentrating on the emergence and establishment (or decline) of school subjects highlights the contested nature of subject knowledge, indicating the role played by various, vested interest groups in the selection and definition of 'appropriate' contents. Ethnographic inquiry provides insights into those factors which mediate between the 'espoused' and the 'enacted' curriculum as well as emphasizing the realization and experience of the different contents and forms of subject knowledge in the classroom. (...) In both cases, conflict, compromise and negotiation are key concepts." (Ball and Goodson 1984, 3-4)

"In short, if you want to make a contribution to comparative education, I urge you to document very closely biology teaching or staff meetings or the role of the principal or individual schools as institutions in several countries. Two principal lines of method are open to you. One is the ethnographic tradition of participant observation. One, which I call the historical tradition, is that of gathering oral evidence by interviews. (...) Historical studies made a gigantic leap forward. (...) I believe that a parallel revolution in comparative education could occur if detailed fieldwork data became available in the form I have proposed, and if comparative studies which have not taken account of such data became unacceptable to scholars in this field." (Stenhouse 1979, 10)

Combining Ball and Goodson's and Stenhouse's promising incitements with our limited experiences in research on mother tongue education in The Netherlands and the results of the discussions within the framework of IMEN, we are inclined to conclude that it is worth a try to generate by research a body of descriptive knowledge on mother tongue education open to comparison in time and space. To our present knowledge that is at least one way to understand what is happening in mother tongue education.

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Footnotes

1. The International Mother Tongue Educational Network (IMEN) is a somewhat informal organisation, set up to initiate and facilitate an international exchange of ideas and an international discussion on mother tongue education, and to organize and carry out international comparative research projects (case studies) in this field. IMEN started in 1981. It now has correspondents in Belgium (Flanders), Denmark, The Federal Republic of Germany, France, Great Britain, Hungary, Italy, The Netherlands and Turkey. Apart from publishing the IMEN Newsletter (now published in cooperation with AILA's Scientific Commission on Mother Tongue Education as the Mother Tongue Education Bulletin) IMEN's major activity since it came into existence has been the organisation of the international conference on mother tongue education mentioned before. This conference was meant to be a first step towards setting up an international comparative research project into the practice of mother tongue education in Europe. The conference reports were published as volumes 1 and 2 of the IMEN series Studies in Mother Tongue Education (Herrlitz et al. 1984a and 1984b).
2. Perhaps the second IMEN conference (Antwerp 1986), which deals with teacher diaries on the practice of mother tongue education in an international perspective, can shed some light on this question (cf. Sturm 1986b).

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