

Social development and social networks in education

14 July 2005

'Young people are causing trouble in the neighbourhood. A young student threatens her teacher.'
Reports such as this have led to calls for more rules and stricter rules. Calls have also been made for greater attention to be given to the social development of young people. During their development, young people come under the influence of people and organizations that teach them how they should conduct themselves. Parents and schools have a significant impact on the development of young people – but so do their peers.

Recently, the Minister of Education introduced a bill to the Dutch Lower House of Parliament which included the incorporation of a set of objectives for citizenship and social integration into the laws governing primary and secondary education. This recommendation builds on the theme of social development. It is the opinion of the Education Council that schools can make a greater contribution to social development if they work better with parents and utilize the contacts established between the parents and young people. Hence, the primary question posed in this recommendation is: how can schools and governments strengthen social development in education with the help of young people's own networks? Secondary questions are:

- (1) What can education do (with the support of other agencies) to strengthen the collaboration with (and networks between) parents?
- (2) How can education (with the support of other agencies) deal with the positive and negative influences of peer pressure and the formation of cliques among young people?
- (3) What can education do to promote tolerance and combat discrimination?
- (4) What can the government do to support the education system in all of this?

The recommendations pertain to the sectors of primary education (years 7 and 8, i.e. ages 10-12), secondary education and senior secondary vocational education (MBO).

Improving collaboration between the school and parents

Timely and structured contact

Every primary, secondary and senior secondary vocational school should work on establishing early structured contact with parents. That means that a school should always have an initial talk with the parents (and pupil), if possible as a part of a visit to their home. The school could then initiate a follow-up meeting each year. The Education Council realizes that the schools are not always able to contact parents. It does, however, hope and expect that schools will persevere in their attempts to contact parents. It is surmised that parents who have a good relationship with the school will be more willing to show understanding for school measures taken and will be more willing to cooperate.

Contacts between parents

Parents help one another with raising their children by things such as setting shared standards: with respect to the time a child must come home or with respect to doing homework. The school can benefit greatly from this concerted effort and therefore could take the initiative of organising gatherings for parents that are focused on themes with which most parents struggle (such as problems with children going through puberty).

Child-rearing support

Local governments are responsible for offering low-threshold child-rearing support to parents. Schools can also benefit from this support given to parents. It is recommended that such support should be given in consultation with the school (for instance in a parent-teacher meeting at the school). Schools that want to investigate the possibilities for such support would benefit from maintaining good contacts and good consultation with the local government.

Utilising the social networks of young people

Young people are important to each other and often provide support and advice to one another.

Schools and teachers should try to utilize this mutual support better. The recommendation specifies a number of ways in which this can be done.

Understanding and knowledge of the young person behind the student

In order to understand the 'young person behind the student', teachers need to know about their social world: to learn about the (street) language they use, about their clothing and behavioural codes, about their life online (chatting, text messaging, etc.). Teacher-training programmes should give greater attention to the environment in which young people live. Teachers can also keep themselves up to date by continually talking to young people about their lives and also by visiting websites young people use to chat with each other. A school can compile knowledge on this social environment through, for instance, students that, as a group, periodically talk with a student counsellor about the atmosphere at school. When teachers have (a general) knowledge of what is going on between various groups, they will be able to pick up signals sooner when something goes awry on the social scene: escalating arguments, for instance, or disgruntlement about school policy.

Joint activities inside and outside the classroom

Young people themselves say that schools should organize more joint activities both inside and outside the classroom. In the classroom, teachers could have the students work together more in teams and use other learning forms aimed at teaching students to work together. Students feel that if they work together, they learn how to relate to each other in a positive manner and to benefit from one another's talents. This creates a good atmosphere. Outside the classroom, there should be more gatherings such as parties and activities such as sports and trips.

Coaching provided by peers and by adults

Young people are often able to come up with solutions to the problems they confront. An interesting instrument to promote this is 'peer coaching': young people that, after being trained, provide their peers with support and advice. There are countless possibilities. Schools can train young people to be supervisors, conflict mediators or mentors. The peer method stresses the strengths of young people, instead of their shortcomings. This method can be expected to contribute to their sense of personal control over situations and thus support their social development. The support of adult mentors from outside the education system can also have positive effects. Through individual supervision, these adult mentors can expand the social knowledge and social strengths of young people.

House system (new style independent study groups)

Schools can influence how students get along by the way that they group them in classes and groups. Through dividing them into groups, schools can bring about meetings between different ethnic groups, for example. Towards this end, schools can enter into ties of friendship with other schools and initiate joint projects or activities. Another idea comes from the British education system, which divides students into houses, each with its own name and character. This enables students to identify with a smaller social unit. The school encourages the students in each house to form a unit together and to compete with other houses through, for instance, sports and formal debates. The Education Council is curious to know whether or not and, if so, how schools could launch forms of this house system in order to influence the contacts between young people. It recommends that the government systematically explore this idea.

Joint approach to negative group of friends

Each school can try to create a good atmosphere – an environment in which it does not pay for young people to be a part of a negative group of friends. Personal contact with the student and his/her parents is very important for achieving this. That is why increasing numbers of schools are down-scaling their school organization by dividing a large building into independent departments in which

teachers, parents and students form a community. The aforementioned house system could also possibly contribute to strengthening the ties between young people and their school. Students also think that teachers should respond more strictly and sooner to groups that display asocial behaviour. To make this possible, schools should reach agreements as a team concerning how they will tackle this problem and support each other in difficult situations that call for courageous intervention.

Promoting tolerance and combating discrimination

Launching separate activities focused on combating discrimination and intolerance at school are not the key solution. The most natural way is to create a positive climate at school, which would leave little desire – as well as little room – for asocial behaviour and the formation of negative groups. The suggestions made above are expected therefore to have a positive effect on tolerance. The school that is confronted by discriminatory attitudes among its students would also benefit by working to create an open atmosphere in which differences of opinion can be discussed. In this way, the school contributes to teaching young people ethics by getting them to enter into dialogue. The school can also make use of peer coaching by, for example, allowing peers to act as discussion leaders or conflict mediators.

The Minister should draw attention to the teaching of ethics at school and to the social world young people live in, for instance, in her consultation with partners in the field of education, such as teacher-training programmes and school boards.

The role of government

Informing schools about the (social education) possibilities open to them

Schools have sufficient legal room to take measures that go further than merely teaching civics. They can, for instance, place students in a special group with extra supervision and maintain this as a condition for enrolment. But are schools sufficiently well informed about the possibilities? The Education Council advises the Minister to describe, in a systematic fashion, the possibilities and instruments (pupils' statute, parents' contract) that schools have to strengthen the education provided. The Minister could also investigate whether (and how) parental authority can in some cases be assumed by a school. The Minister can then inform the schools explicitly and completely about the possibilities open to them.

Giving attention to the 'core' values and principles of the democratic constitutional state is vitally important to teaching the concept of civics. Attention to 'small' virtues (respect for others, manners) is an essential precursor to this. In the parliamentary debate on the Civics Bill, these matters can be brought up for discussion so that schools later have a guideline for devising a programme for teaching civics.

Exploring the possibilities of peer coaching, mentoring and the house system

The Minister could investigate, for instance via pilot projects, the opportunities offered by peer coaching, mentoring by adults and the house system. The precise effects of these options have not yet been identified. The national government could take the lead in this.

Investing extra funds in strengthening contacts with parents

The Minister will make extra funds available next school year for student counselling in secondary education. In the opinion of the Education Council, these funds should also be spent on strengthening contacts with parents through things such as visits to their homes. A school should also be able to use the funds to support peer coaching and mentoring. In addition, the strengthening of contacts with parents in secondary education should be on the agenda of the Minister.

Local governments

Each school should strive to maintain structured contacts with its local government, the designated collaboration partner in this field. From their side, local governments should hold structured consultation with school boards and school heads. Some local governments could pay greater attention

to the needs of our younger citizens: by providing places where they can come together and providing activities that help them to get to know one another (sporting events and parties). The Education Council is also asking local governments to give priority to providing a sufficient supply of low-threshold child-rearing support as a part of the local youth policy. It is also important here to work together with educators: can child-rearing support be situated in school buildings?