

The state of affairs in Dutch education

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The standard of education in the Netherlands is fairly high. In comparison to other countries, the Dutch overall scores can be assessed as reasonable to good. Parents and other citizens are satisfied with the quality of schools and teachers. Every year, the Inspectorate of Education draws a similar conclusion. Yet there are causes for concern as well, for instance, the high proportion of early school-leavers, problematic behaviour among pupils, the position of teachers and safety at school. This dual picture of education prompted the Education Council to issue its report of recommendation entitled *The state of affairs in Dutch education*. This report is an attempt to place the data presently available in a broader framework but does not have the pretension of offering a definitive analysis of Dutch education. What trends has the Dutch education system gone through over the past decades and what are its strong and weak points in international terms? What main policy strategies have we pursued and what alternatives are there? Which policy actions are called for in order to gear our education better to social expectations?

Social context

In the first place, *The state of affairs in Dutch education* must be considered against the backdrop of recent social developments which make demands on education as the socio-cultural and economic driving force of society. In the socio-cultural domain, schools have to prepare pupils for participation in a democratic, multi-ethnic society and pass on intrinsic knowledge of (Dutch) culture and history. In the socio-economic field, schools are responsible for imparting the competencies required for our modern knowledge society and providing adequate and flexible qualifications for the labour market. Given the fact that one's level of education is a decisive factor in the further course of one's life, it is of paramount importance for society to invest sufficiently in education.

Comparative analysis

Secondly, *The state of affairs in Dutch education* is considered against the backdrop of the developments over the past decades and the situation in surrounding nations. The report presents a large amount of data on various types of input in education, on process characteristics and on results of education.

Input. Since the end of the 1980s, the government has been pursuing a policy of deregulation and increased autonomy, in order to give schools a greater say. In the 1990s, this was concretised when schools acquired greater independence with regard to the use of funds and with regard to their staffing policies. At the same time, intermediary actors such as municipalities and the Education Inspectorate gained more influence. In addition, the 1990s were characterised by cutbacks, scale expansions and increased market orientation in education. Dutch schools now have considerable autonomy compared to schools in, for instance, Germany and France. Dutch expenditure for education as a percentage of the GDP (gross domestic product) dropped significantly between the 1970s and the end of the 1990s. In international terms, both government spending and private contributions to education are relatively low, particularly in secondary education. Over the past decades, participation in education has risen sharply, and consequently the average level of education of the population is considerably higher vis-à-vis three decades ago. The proportion of women participating in education now virtually equals that of men, although women still tend to shun the exact disciplines. Educational disadvantages based on social environment and ethnic background have decreased but not disappeared. Generally speaking, participation in education in the Netherlands is on a par with or higher than that in other Western countries. An exception is the lagging participation of children under the age of five. At the moment sufficient numbers of students are entering teacher training courses nationwide. However, there are differences between regions and new teacher-shortages are expected to arise, partly as a result of the ageing of the professional group. Particularly schools with a great deal of disadvantaged pupils have difficulty attracting and maintaining staff. In addition, a trend can be observed in schools towards increased task and job differentiation. This means that teachers are charged with specialist duties and teaching positions are developing under and above the basic position of teacher. In primary education, men are under-represented among teachers, in higher education women are. In international terms, teachers' salaries correspond to the average. Workloads are high in comparison with other countries, whereas the

social status of the profession has decreased. The quality of the teacher training courses is a cause for concern.

Process. Over the past few decades, the Dutch education system has seen many changes. Not all goals set have actually been realised. In 1985, pre-school education and education for 6–12 year-olds were consolidated into one institute for primary education, but the sector is still working on realising continuous learning routes and customised teaching. Attempts to curb the numbers entering special education by extending the special needs provision in ordinary schools have resulted merely in a levelling out of the growth. In secondary education, VMBO (pre-vocational secondary education) is a particular source of concern. In the adult and vocational education sector, MBO (senior secondary vocational education) and adult education have been harmonised and largely integrated into ROCs (regional training centres). Outside of these ROCs, however, the courses available to adults are still rather fragmented. Since the 1990s, HBO (higher professional education) and universities together constitute the higher education sector. In practice, however, the two programmes are still separated. One of the facts that emerge in comparison with other countries is that in the Netherlands and Flanders privately-run schools account for the majority of the education sector, whereas public-authority schools dominate in surrounding countries. Finally, the amount of face-to-face instruction in primary and secondary education is fairly high. However, this is, so to speak, balanced out by the high number of lessons that are cancelled.

Results. In contrast to the reference countries, the Netherlands present a positive picture when it comes to *short-term results*: Dutch pupils attain good test results on reading skills, maths and science. Functional literacy (understanding practical documents such as timetables and manuals) of the population is also quite high. The Netherlands do, however, have a comparatively high number of early school-leavers; on the other hand, enrolment numbers in higher education are also high. The number of graduates in the exact disciplines is fairly low in the Netherlands. In the *longer term* education yields significant individual and social results, such as improved chances of employment and a good income, technological progress, social participation, decreased criminality and economies in social services and health care.

Policy strategies

Thirdly, *The state of affairs in Dutch education* is considered against the backdrop of a number of policy strategies that are distinctive for Dutch education policy: public funding, deregulation, a uniform curriculum and qualification as the main object of education (which, for the sake of argument, is seen as being opposed to socialisation). The Council discusses these policy strategies in connection with their counterparts: private funding, central direction, differentiation in educational provision and socialisation as the other main objective of education.

Public and private funding. In the Netherlands, public funding of education has been the predominant policy strategy for almost a century. One of the ways in which this strategy is manifest is the equal funding of publicly-run and privately-run schools. In international terms this system is quite unique. The freedom of parents and pupils to choose a school which matches their wishes is often regarded as a forte of the Dutch system. Current public discussion on this topic focuses on the fact that freedom of parental choice fosters segregation between black and white schools. In adult/vocational education and higher education, freedom of school choice is less of an issue; in these sectors, the main subjects of present discussion are the trend towards a more equal treatment of publicly-run and privately-run courses and the opportunities for increased private sector contributions.

Central and decentralised control. In the Council's opinion, the Netherlands have struck a reasonable balance between central and decentralised control. Because of their fairly high degree of autonomy, institutions can adopt a flexible approach in adapting to local circumstances and set their own spending priorities. In this context, decentralisation of some policies, for instance staff policies, to the schools merits continuation. However, the government should retain primary responsibility for certain other issues, such as establishing attainment targets and regulating supervision by the Inspectorate of Education. A system of national supervision and accountability is essential in order to warrant the quality of education. The national examinations in secondary education constitute an example of an important mechanism helping schools to keep up their standards. Possibilities for improving incentives for educational establishments to (continue to) provide high quality education include increasing the transparency of the curriculum and discouraging far-

reaching scale expansion. The latter could be effected, for instance, by means of a pre-test for intended mergers.

Uniformity and differentiation in the curriculum. The Dutch education system has traditionally focused on providing equal educational opportunities for those of equal ability. In primary education and basic secondary education, this objective is expressed in a uniform basic curriculum. The second stage of secondary education, MBO, and higher education focus on helping students to obtain a diploma at the level of their particular abilities. Consequently, the curriculum is highly differentiated in level and content. In the past few years, people have realised that both equal opportunities and maximum opportunities for development are crucial in every sector of education. Primary education and higher education, in particular, still do not offer sufficient possibilities for optimal development of pupils' and students' cognitive talents. More connections between in-school and extra-curricular courses are needed for pupils and students with special talents (art and culture, sports, entrepreneurial skills). Promoting equal opportunities calls for greater investments in early childhood education, as well as attention for pupils in VMBO and MBO for whom the established minimum standards are too high. Additionally, more programmes should be introduced at a level halfway between MBO and HBO, such as short HBO courses.

Qualifying and socialising. Preparing pupils for the labour market (qualifying) and for participation in society (socialising) are two coherent key objectives of education. The Dutch education system is still mainly focused on measurable performances and qualifications, but current social trends demand more attention for the socialising role of education. As a result, attention to social skills seems to have made a comeback. The Council advocates that the government should encourage schools and parents to come to clear agreements on what the responsibilities of the school and those of the parents do and do not include. Another important issue is the development of measuring instruments for social skills.

Conclusion

Based on the above, the Council concludes that the Dutch education system performs reasonably well. However, insufficient attention is devoted to the socialisation task of the schools, including the imparting of cultural and historical awareness. Moreover, too many young people leave school without a basic qualification and talents are sometimes insufficiently challenged. Furthermore, knowledge on the effectiveness of educational policy is lacking and few students appear to be interested in the teaching profession. Several matters are essential in order to meet social expectations. To that end, the Council formulates the following four recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Top ambitions require more and differentiated investments

Within the framework of the European Lisbon objectives, the Netherlands aims to hold its own by 2010 among the European top when it comes to a knowledge-based economy. Since education is the driving force behind a knowledge-based economy, the Netherlands must increase its investments in the level of education of its population in order to realise this ambition. Education needs more public and private-sector funds and these funds should be regarded primarily as investments rather than expenses. This will prevent economisation at the expense of profitable education expenditure. Priority must be given to investments in teachers (cf. Recommendation 3) and, with regard to pupils and students, to investments in both the lower and the upper layers of the various types of education. Education should offer more customised teaching, by gearing the approaches used not only to differences in learning styles, interests, etcetera, but also explicitly to differences in ability. The ambition standards for education must be high; the sub top is not sufficient. Priority should be given to expanding early childhood education, increasing the in-school curriculum and extra-curricular activities for talented primary school pupils, possibilities for certification of MBO pupils below level 1, intermediate facilities between MBO and HBO, increased differentiation in higher education, focusing more attention on exact disciplines and the position of poorly educated people in relation to life-long learning. More differentiation is required to be able to offer customised teaching in the upper segments of higher education. Selection is an obvious instrument in this respect but not entirely without risk. Selection after the gate (for instance, at the beginning of the course programme by way of a binding recommendation and upon admission to an honours programme) would be preferable to selection at the gate.

Recommendation 2: Attention to the canon as an expression of our cultural identity

It is essential for schools to devote more attention to the socialising task of education. This includes paying attention to our cultural identity. Two key components of this task are the contribution of schools to a

modern interpretation of citizenship and to the transfer and further development of our cultural heritage. The Council intends to reinforce the relevance of education to society by having a new canon for education developed. This should focus on the valuable components of our culture and history that we wish to impart to new generations through education. The canon is important for society as a whole, not for just an elitist group. In addition, the canon is both preserving and reforming in nature.

The Council views the canon as consisting of three closely related components: an aggregate of contents, a line of reasoning behind these contents and a method to effect regular readjustment of the contents and the line of reasoning. The Council proposes that the canon be expressed in curriculum content. The curriculum areas, subjects and disciplines initially associated with the canon will be asked to contribute to the content of the canon. The domains concerned are language teaching, history, environmental studies, social studies, culture and the arts and science development. However, curriculum content in the areas of geography and technology could also be covered by the canon.

Incidentally, the fact that the canon will be formulated in curriculum content does not mean that these must all be mandatory subjects in education. Part of the canon will be expressed in attainment targets and examination programmes. However, the canon will encompass more – both in terms of content and in terms of types of schools involved. The canon will be made up of several layers: a content layer that emerges in attainment targets and examination programmes; a content layer that serves as a guideline for education beyond the basic curriculum and a layer that extends beyond education.

The Council envisages that the Minister will establish the components of the canon that come to the fore in attainment targets and examination programmes. With regard to the two other layers of the canon, the Minister does not have statutory responsibility; the Minister could, however, provide the entire canon to the educational world as an important national directive and guideline for education.

Recommendation 3: Increasing investments in education professions

Teachers are deemed to substantiate the expectations of society. That is why permanent investments in the education professions are of paramount importance.

To begin with, the image of the teaching profession is in need of improvement. The line of existing initiatives is worth following. The Council proposes investigating whether recruitment campaigns can be differentiated according to school type. This opens up the possibility of emphasising specific aspects – such as teaching at schools with high proportions of disadvantaged pupils, working with gifted children – as an additional challenge for those who wish to make a difference in society.

Teachers also deserve direct support. Therefore it pleases the Council that the Minister has recently earmarked structural funds to increase the salaries of teachers in VMBO and practical training.

In addition, schools and the government should join forces to improve the conditions under which teachers do their job. First of all, this requires paying sufficient attention to schooling and training, both proper initial professional training and in-service training in schools and among teaching staff. Efforts to reform the current training system must be continued as a matter of urgency. Focal points include gearing the training courses to the demands of schools and future teachers; making allowances for task and job differentiation; co-operation between teacher training courses and schools; training specifically aimed at schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils and further development of the integrated staff policies of educational establishments.

Support in dealing with problematic behaviour and personal problems of pupils and students also contributes to improving the working conditions of teachers. An implementation team with representatives from the school and external experts appears to be an appropriate instrument to ensure sufficient support from external bodies. Schools should be able to claim the services of experts (child psychiatrists, local police, youth psychologists) for a number of hours per stipulated time period. The Council recommends beginning with this system for schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

Finally, the working conditions of teachers will improve when the pressure of regulations is eased and supervision is sober and selective. Schools and teachers must set their own course and get busy redesigning education and the related staff policy.

Recommendation 4: Intensifying knowledge

Classroom practitioners, educational policy and society alike could make better use of the existing body of knowledge on education.

In order to improve the faltering relationship between educational research and educational practice, knowledge developers need to focus more attention on implementation. In addition, demand-driven education should be encouraged so that educational establishments, can influence the practical orientation of the courses. Incentive budgets are needed for initiatives deployed by knowledge developers, intermediary organisations and educational establishments to form joint knowledge communities focusing on specific subjects. Ways to foster knowledge management in educational establishments include providing facilities for teachers who wish to develop into internal knowledge developers and/or participate in a knowledge community. Knowledge management can also be boosted by fostering initiatives to form knowledge circles within and among schools.

The Netherlands should be a key initiator and participant in comparative studies into the strengths and weaknesses of education and the mechanisms underpinning these features. In order to be able to determine the effects of educational policy, any measure implemented should, as a rule, be accompanied by a properly set up evaluation plan which also clearly outlines the objectives of the measure. This plan should indicate the manner in which evaluation will take place and what results will be determinative for the success or otherwise. In the opinion of the Council, (semi-) experimental research (involving a control group) into the effects of educational reforms and policy measures would be the best evaluation method.

The available knowledge on education would be of more use to society if the findings of educational studies are the basis for proper communication on the weaknesses and strengths of Dutch education and the mechanisms leading to that situation. This can prevent public opinion from wrongfully holding strengths to be weaknesses. Aware that boosting an image is no simple matter and can only be achieved in small steps at a time, the Council proposes that the Minister should have a communication strategy developed for education, which will allow various target groups to be reached and will also allow participation by representatives of society, for whom education, after all, is of vital importance.