

Reinforcing Knowledge in Education

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The position of knowledge in education is under pressure

“Pupils are no longer able to do long divisions and know nothing about their nation's history.”
“Students have a good life, but they have no factual knowledge.” If we believe the media, education is imparting little or no knowledge to young people. For this reason, the Minister of OCW (Education, Culture and Science) asked the Education Council to focus an exploratory study on the following question: is it necessary for schools to give greater attention to imparting knowledge?

Dutch primary and secondary education are of a considerably high standard compared with other countries. The same is true of university education and of parts of senior secondary vocation education and higher professional education in the Netherlands. Across the board, the schools and institutions manage to impart the established content of curriculum to pupils and students. Yet it seems that the position of knowledge in education is under pressure. This is apparent from the wave of criticism which basically says that education is not imparting enough knowledge. It is also apparent from the institutes for homework assistance that are springing up like mushrooms, from students that study only a limited number of hours on average each day and from the decreasing number of hours spent in face-to-face instruction (extensification of education).

Five recommendations to improve the imparting of knowledge in education

Education serves many objectives and target groups. It would not be sensible to give just a single answer to the question of whether education should give greater attention to imparting knowledge. The education sectors and the subject areas differ to such an extent that answering this question accurately produces a differentiated picture. Summarising this, the Education Council states that, in all education sectors, the priority given to imparting knowledge can be strengthened. Because not only people with insufficient knowledge are in danger of lagging behind the pack – people with a better education can also lose ground due to insufficient knowledge. The Education Council has formulated five recommendations to strengthen the priority given to imparting knowledge in education.

1) Provide better monitoring of students' level of knowledge

National data on pupils and students' command of specific areas of knowledge are available only to a limited degree. As a result, education cannot sufficiently identify those signals that indicate a decreasing level of knowledge or the deterioration of knowledge acquired in education. That is why, initially, more information is necessary about the levels of knowledge achieved. This information can be obtained by setting up national, structural surveys in primary education, secondary education and higher education, and in the adult and vocational education sector.

2) Rectify knowledge gaps in Dutch and mathematics

From the available surveys, it seems there is not a strong deterioration in the level of knowledge across the board in education. But there are indications that in all education sectors the level of knowledge in the subject areas of Dutch and mathematics has declined. It also seems that education sometimes rectifies the shortcoming in the knowledge of pupils and students, only to discover in the process that they have a shortfall in their knowledge of Dutch and mathematics. With respect to the Dutch language, there is generally a lack of basic skills such as vocabulary, good grammar and sentence structure, as well as a lack of more complex skills such as being able to distinguish between essentials and minor considerations, mental organisation and reasoning. With respect to mathematics, the level of knowledge has declined and there is a shortcoming in numerical skills and formula skills in algebra and calculus. For this reason, the Education Council has formulated a second recommendation, i.e. that study programmes and institutions should identify and rectify shortcomings in the subjects of Dutch and mathematics among their pupils and students, and that the Minister of Education should give support to such rectification programmes.

3) Improve the system for establishing and recording the educational content

The manner in which we currently establish and maintain the educational content is insufficiently systematic. The Internet, moreover, provides an enormous, yet unorganised abundance of information sources, i.e. knowledge. In response to this supply, emphasis is being shifted to searching, finding and selecting this information. That is why the Education Council thirdly recommends that a better system should be established for determining the content of education which periodically involves a greater number of people in exploring this educational content and thus provides greater freedom for considerations about the importance of curriculum content. Because taking part in a discussion of the educational content is what many people want; we should provide the freedom for this and not cordon off the content of education.

It is important here to indicate again what the essential core of a subject area or area of learning is and what could be regarded as the periphery. To achieve this, content reference points should be established, such as a basic level and learning standards, preferably coupled to the European qualification framework. The Internet makes it possible to make this knowledge and the accompanying teaching materials available to the schools relatively cheaply, efficiently and in a form that is easy to update. In this way, schools will not have to wait for textbooks that are printed once every few years. This concentration on the essential core and granting access to the educational content can be important to strengthening the priority given to imparting knowledge in education. The Education Council considers the recording and (external) testing of the pupils' and students' level of knowledge important, especially in a situation in which educational institutions bear responsibility for organising the education provided. Freedom in the "how" goes hand in hand with clarity about the "what".

4) Make the content of education the centre of focus, in the reforming process as well

Education should continually improve and modernise from within. Fortunately, education is fully focused and active in this area. Compared with some time past, there is now an internal vitality that cannot be commended too much. Still, some caution is in order, because there is sometimes a problematic relationship between the content of education and the reform of education. Study programmes, for instance, make independent learning a centrepiece within the context of educational reform and say that education should focus on the learning process instead of the teaching content. Teachers should assist pupils in the process of acquiring knowledge instead of imparting that knowledge themselves. Learning through practical experience takes the place of school-based education. All of this can lead to curriculum taking on an informal nature and lessen appreciation for the content of education. The fourth recommendation therefore is: independent of all reforms introduced to the teaching process, the introduction to structured areas of knowledge remains the central component in education. Moreover: as long as it has not been proved that a new teaching method and approach works (on evidence), it should in any case be clear that its introduction has no undesirable effects on a pupil's further educational career. Process improvements are necessary, but no one really wants to lessen appreciation for the educational content.

5) Maintain and strengthen the teachers' level of knowledge

The fifth recommendation to strengthen the priority given to imparting knowledge in education is, finally, a recommendation that has already been made, yet one that is still crucial: that is to keep the level of both teachers' teaching skills and teacher training programmes up to standard and even to improve them. The professional knowledge of teachers must not lose any of its importance. To provide a good education, a good basic knowledge on the part of teachers is essential.

The Netherlands deserves a higher educational standard

Should we be satisfied with the current level of education? Our fifteen-year-olds score well at the international level, but the tests given to measure this are not that difficult. Couldn't we raise the standard in all educational sectors? In view of our cultural background, our prosperity, technological development and the ambitions that we have, shouldn't we expect a higher level of learning from pupils, students and teachers? The Education Council thinks that we should. But raising the standard of education will require more time and money invested in education. For instance, scrapping the possibility to take the mean score between two subjects during the examinations in secondary education requires greater effort from both pupils and teachers. A higher standard for the subjects

of Dutch and mathematics in senior secondary vocational education requires subject teachers who take the time to teach these subjects. Giving greater attention to the subject of Dutch in higher education requires teaching efforts; counting the Dutch language as a part of the assessment also requires more correction time. The Education Council supports upgrading the standard by which we assess ourselves. There is no reason to be satisfied if so much more can be achieved through extra effort. The Education Council adds this point to its five aforementioned recommendations.

A debate on the acquisition of knowledge in education and by educators

Five recommendations for strengthening the priority given to imparting knowledge in education and one for raising the standard of education. But do the stakeholders agree with the diagnosis and the recommendations? Do educators and other professionals have the same priorities or do they have other priorities? How would the higher standard for an educational route, subject cluster or study programme be expressed? The Education Council will organise a wide-ranging consultation among everyone involved, requesting that they discuss the analysis and recommendations from the exploratory study within the school or institution and possibly inform the Education Council about their findings. The Education Council will use the results of this consultation to revise the recommendations made to the Minister in 2007.