

The State of Affairs in Dutch Education 2009

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Greater involvement of society in education. This is the wish of the Education Council expressed in this advisory report. The Education Council is particularly concerned about active involvement: not just talking about it, but actually making a difference to education.

The Education Council's expression of this wish comes following the analysis of national and international data on and reports into education and educational policy in the last four years. Four years ago, in its first publication entitled the State of Affairs in Dutch Education, the Education Council took stock of educational policy. This latest instalment looks at the preceding four years. In this document, the Education Council does not aim to give a definitive analysis, but rather aims to put the various data currently available into a broader context, to point out some strengths and weaknesses, and to make recommendations for future policy.

The performance of Dutch school children in international comparisons is still fairly respectable (upper segment), but the number of school pupils with poor reading skills has increased in recent years according to PISA research (OECD Programme for International Student Assessment). What's more, performance in mathematics (especially by girls) has fallen in the past ten years. Similarly, examination results for the language and arithmetic skills of first-year students in higher education are a cause for concern. Dutch school children score well in international comparisons up to the age of 15. However, in certain rankings the Dutch have dropped below the levels achieved a few years ago.

Various studies also show that the Netherlands does do relatively well at the lower end of the results tables, but that performance of Dutch pupils at the higher end of the results spectrum are disappointing. In Singapore, for example, 41% of pupils scored the highest level in the exact subjects as measured in TIMMS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study), compared to 7% of Dutch pupils. Policy has recently been put in place to help stimulate the upper end of the spectrum also. By making better use of existing opportunities to use teaching time, both the lower end and the upper end of the spectrum could be better served.

The increase in 'alternative education' also points towards a certain lack of satisfaction with mainstream education. This happens when children of compulsory school age leave mainstream education and find an alternative in private schools or in Belgium or Germany. Another form is the use of complementary education, such as 'homework institutes'. These in particular have seen a strong increase in recent years. Currently around 6% to 11% of school pupils avail of the services of homework institutes.

In response to the performance of Dutch school pupils in international comparisons, more emphasis has been placed on language and arithmetic as part of the qualifying role of education. Furthermore, attention for the socialising role of education is also important. There are various developments that strengthen this role of education. Nevertheless, systematic attention for citizenship in education is still underdeveloped. There is still little known about the effect of the various forms of citizenship education. The time is therefore ripe for a systematic long-term development plan aimed at establishing a small core of citizenship training for everyone, while leaving schools free to choose from a broader offering. The socialising and qualifying roles of education sometimes have a tense relationship. The Education Council would therefore prefer to lay the emphasis on aspects where these socialising and qualifying roles can enhance each other.

Possibility of 'stacking' study programmes is very important

Dutch school pupils from ethnic backgrounds perform relatively well compared to their peers in Belgium and Germany. Despite this, there is still a significant gap between 'ethnic pupils' and 'white pupils'. Ethnic children do not go on to study in higher education as often as white children, although the gap is getting smaller. Although we need to see more ethnic students in Dutch higher education, the drop-out rate among this group is the major challenge. Drop-out rates among students from ethnic backgrounds are currently very high,

resulting in a considerable gap in the attained educational standard. This, however, does not detract from the fact that the progress made within one generation has been formidable.

Early selection in the Dutch secondary education system could make it hard for certain groups, such as those with a learning delay or late developers, to progress to higher education through senior general secondary education (HAVO) or, more especially, senior secondary vocational education (MBO). In this connection, it is very important that pupils are given the opportunity to progress to higher levels of education, for example, by 'stacking' their education programmes. In this regard, senior secondary vocational education (MBO) is a priceless resource in the Dutch education system.

The policy of increasing autonomy in the education system has been continued in recent years, for example with the progressive decentralisation of collective bargaining in primary and secondary education. In an increasing number of areas, the government establishes the central criteria, but has fewer ways of exerting influence than it previously had. This raises the question of whether the government still has enough significance in these areas of education.

This increase in autonomy is in line with the great freedom of choice that has traditionally been characteristic of Dutch education. In most sectors of education, there still appears to be sufficient freedom of choice. The tendency seen in recent years towards larger schools under a single board does not necessarily impinge on this. In certain areas, however, the increased size of schools has led to the formation of monopolies that do in fact threaten freedom of choice. Because of this, in its recommendation entitled the Growth of Governance in Dutch Education (*De bestuurlijke ontwikkeling van het Nederlandse onderwijs*) (2008b), the Education Council called for a merger check to ensure a minimum level of choice of schools.

Public expenditure on education is still relatively low by international standards. Furthermore, private spending on education is modest and does nothing to compensate for the low public expenditure. Given the return on investment (individual and social), total spending on education could be higher, both in the public and private segments. Public spending per pupil, especially in secondary education, is lower than in neighbouring countries. The Education Council therefore calls for more public and private investment in education. Furthermore, young people need to learn to deal more with public and private funding sources for their own educational career.

Developments in recent years have given rise to a considerable resurgence in the discussion on education. Newspaper reports about abuses in education clamour for readers' attentions and the Dijsselbloem inquiry led to a veritable boom in media interest. The fact the education is being discussed is a good thing. It is important to have a discussion on how citizens should be involved in the education of young people and what they need to learn. The discussion in the media, for example, is primarily concerned with the question of whether standards have risen or fallen compared to previous years. But there are other interesting subjects, such as the subject matter of education.

A positive side-effect of the discussion on education is that in 2008 more people claimed to have a reasonable to good or very good idea of what young people learn at school (72%). Furthermore, citizens are reasonably content with education in the Netherlands. Parents of children in primary and secondary education give the education a score of 7 out of 10, while teachers give it 7.5. The Dutch population in general are less positive. They gave Dutch education and teachers in 2008 an average score of 6. This discrepancy between the opinion of one's own school and education in general suggests that the purported increase in problems in education is largely attributable to a negative image.

Interest in education in society is currently high, but is influenced in part by a negative image. There are also some issues in education which we are rightly concerned about. At present, the Netherlands is by no means doing badly, but given the ambitions set out in the Innovation Platform's Knowledge Investment Agenda (*Kennis-investeringensagenda*), for example, we cannot really afford to be content with the current, and more or

less stable performance level¹. In this light, the Education Council calls for reflection on how the interest shown by society can be put to the best use for education.

In the Education Council's view, it would be good if there were a revival of society identifying with education. This would see responsibility for providing good education shift to all citizens. It goes without saying, of course, that all the various groups that make up society have a different role to play in discharging this responsibility. And the involvement required will not come about by itself. It will need to be organised at the instigation of the education field and the government. The Education Council has formulated five recommendations concerning the adoption of responsibility for education.

1) More public and private funding needed

Bigger budgets are needed to achieve the ambitions formulated for education. This requires an optimum combination of public and private money. This point is in line with the Social & Cultural Report 2006 in which the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP argues that children of low-skilled parents are these days increasingly prepared to invest more in their own education. The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) appealed for an increase in public investment in education given the importance of raising the general standard of education in the light of our international competitive position. Combining public and private funding would allow optimum investment in education and training.

The Education Council invites the minister to draft a long-term plan which activates and effectively deploys public and private money together. In the Education Council's view, the priority for extra public investment lies in secondary education, where comparisons show that relatively little is spent per capita, and in pre-school education (three to five year-olds). The additional private investment could benefit all educational sectors, in particular higher education.

2) Develop some suitable central elements

Education in the Netherlands has traditionally been decentralised, and this tendency has increased in the past twenty years. It is important to ensure that the government is not insignificant within this structure, and to develop a number of suitable central elements within the decentralised structure. The Education Council proposes that the Minister establish a National Expert Group for Education Funding and a National Forum for Educational Accommodation.

The Expert Group for Educational Funding could ensure that information, experiences and insight into educational funding are shared within the sectors and with other sectors. It could also discuss relationships between funding and educational developments. The National Forum for Educational Accommodation could do the same thing in respect of educational accommodation facilities and their effects on educational results. The Minister could encourage both bodies and act as dialogue partner.

3) Educational content in the spotlight

A good way to encourage involvement in education is to hold a debate on educational content. The debate could consider what 'we' consider important for people to learn at school. Do pupils need to learn long division? What does an engineer need to know and do? Some subjects regularly change, sometimes very markedly, as biology is doing at the moment. It would be good if more people would get involved in this, and by doing so demonstrate their profound interest in education. The Education Council proposes that the Minister facilitate the teachers' subject and discipline-based groups to lead these debates.

4) Concept of Extended Education as a policy principle

Schools and other educational institutions play an important role in the learning process, but learning and education take place in many other contexts outside the formal school time. This process is not limited to the 1,040 hours available in the first year of secondary school, the 940 hours at primary school, or the 850 hours in senior secondary vocational education (MBO). The effective learning time of pupils can be extended and intensified by educational institutions themselves (extended school day, extended school week, 'plus classes' (plus-

¹ Innovation Platform, 2006.

klassen), honours programmes, *Studium Generale*), and by other organisations, such as homework institutes. The combined action of these forms of learning are referred to by the Education Council as Extended Education (*Uitgebreid Onderwijs*).

The Education Council proposes that the concept of Extended Education is adopted as a policy principle, and that the variety of detached actions, programmes and initiatives are brought under this umbrella and included in the policy-making process. The concept is helpful when considering whether a given facility, such as a homework club, could qualify for government funding. The Education Council does not want to discourage private initiatives, but rather to ensure that these initiatives get the recognition they deserve, because they make an important contribution to our education system.

5) Ensure prominent public figures identify with education

Finally, the Education Council recommends that we ensure that notable public figures from all sections of society become more interested in and identify themselves with education. There are many ways of getting them involved in education. In each sector of education – from primary education to higher professional education – initiatives could be taken to provide facilities or a reception structure in which notable public figures, experts, professionals and opinion makers from leading local and regional organisations could be given an opportunity to do something substantial for schools, regional training centres (ROCs) and third-level institutions. This would make it easier for these people to share in the responsibility for future generations.

The Education Council expects that these recommendations will contribute to a greater involvement by society, and strengthen the bond between education and society and between citizens and teachers.