

Achieving according to ability

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Can education be improved even more? Yes, it can. Of the nearly two and a half million pupils that attend primary schools and secondary schools in the Netherlands every day, most of them perform at the level that their abilities allow. However, more than 10% of school pupils perform below their personal level of ability. They achieve fewer high scores than their cognitive aptitude would suggest they are capable of. School heads and teachers can improve this performance by taking targeted action, such as intensified teaching, extra learning time and additional subject matter. The government, teacher associations and school boards should make this possible through extra funding, training and by reaching clear agreements on teaching objectives, the use of tests and the effective use of available resources.

In these recommendations, the Education Council looks at the problem of underachieving pupils from a large number of perspectives and proposes a number of specific measures. These recommendations are intended to raise the cognitive level of underachieving pupils in primary and secondary education. To achieve this, the people involved must put in considerable effort.

These recommendations are made in response to the following requests for opinion from the Minister for Education, Culture and Science.

- What measures and activities can the education community undertake to reduce cognitive underachievement?
- What measures should the government take and what conditions must it put in place to enable the education community to achieve this?
- What differentiating measures (particularly in primary and secondary education) appear to help underachieving pupils, how do these relate to the regular teaching provided and what extra financial resources would be required?

Scale of underachievement

The Education Council asked the ITS institute for applied social sciences and the SCO-Kohnstamm Instituut to ascertain how many pupils are underachieving and whether or not these pupils share certain characteristics. The researchers reanalysed data from the longitudinal Primary Education Cohort Studies. This allowed them to compare and correlate data on the same pupils at several points in their school careers.

The analysis indicates that underachievement does exist on a national scale in the Netherlands. In other words, there are pupils who, given their abilities, could be performing better at school than they are. The percentage of underachieving pupils varies from 10% to 18% of the entire group of pupils, depending on the benchmark used.

Targeted education

Providing an effective education to underachieving pupils requires teachers to tailor their approach and teaching methods to the specific abilities and needs of their pupils. The individual, competent teacher is the best person to make the – highly intuitive – match between the demands of the education provided and the abilities of the pupil. However, certain conditions do have to be met to achieve this. In schools, there are three ways that the education can be tailored: intensification of learning, extra learning time and additional subject matter.

Costs and benefits

Tailoring education to pupils' needs costs money, and considerable work still has to be done in the search for the most effective types of tailor-made education. At the macro level, a direct connection cannot be made between the use of specific forms of tailor-made education and the associated benefits. It is, however, possible to make estimates. If, for example, we were successful in getting 3% more VMBO pupils (preparatory vocational secondary education) to transfer to a higher level of education, then this would translate to an increase in income for these pupils of 400 million euro per cohort. A more ambitious scenario indicates that reducing language delays among the current underachievers in primary education – 15% to 18% of the pupils - would result in an increase in income of more than 2.5 billion euro. There would also be other social benefits, such as reductions in the costs for health care, social security, and crime, for example.

Apart from the teaching principle that 'every pupil counts', it is therefore clear that there are also economic benefits to be gained from tackling the problem of underachievement in primary and secondary education. The benefits certainly outweigh the costs. The proposed measures summarised below should be seen in that light.

Recommendations

To some degree, the recommendations relate to the instruments we can use to better equip schools to identify underachieving pupils sooner and more effectively, and to the specific measures we can take to help them. The recommendations also have the strategic aim of putting the issue on the agenda: the central question here is how all pupils, including the underachieving ones, can be brought to a higher level of achievement. This report divides the recommendations into five groups.

1) Setting clear objectives and using specific testing instruments

The first group of recommendations concerns the financial, situational and rule-based support of the use of tests and the introduction of learning standards. The government could deploy various instruments in this area, such as improvements to the weighting system (lowering the threshold to 1% or 2%), and financial support for the use of tests, such as the pupil monitoring systems. The Education Council reiterates the importance of setting learning standards midway through and at the end of primary education, and at the end of the lower years of secondary education. To make these learning standards sufficiently challenging for all pupils, the Education Council proposes the adoption of three standards: basic, satisfactory and advanced.

2) Introducing extra learning time

The second group of recommendations concerns the introduction of extra learning time beyond the regular teaching time. This report sees a range of possibilities for this, such as teaching at the weekend, during the summer holidays and after school hours (such as in the 'community school'), and compulsory education for four-year-olds. This will require the targeted use of extra funding as an incentive.

3) Training, certification and diploma-linked bonus

The third group of recommendations concerns further training for teachers and school heads. Some teachers should follow a training programme to increase their expertise in the area of underachieving pupils, for example, a specially designed training programme that leads to a formal diploma. School boards would reward such a diploma with a financial bonus. The same applies to school heads. The increase in expertise is needed in: language teaching for pupils with low-skilled parents; knowledge of the Turkish language in relation to learning to speak Dutch; and training school heads to take an integrated approach to underachievement.

4) Studies and evidence-based structures in education

The fourth group of recommendations concerns a number of studies into 'unchartered waters' in various areas, such as the increasing incidence of behavioural problems among young people, the contrast between boys and girls at school and the delayed development of boys, the tendency among girls to not choose exact science subjects, and periodic national surveys of underachievement among school pupils.

5) A format for the final reports of primary schools

The final set of recommendations relates to the last phase of year eight (ages 11 and 12) in primary education. The Education Council proposes that the period between a school's recommendation on pupils' choice of secondary school and the end of the school year should be devoted, more than it is now, to teaching and instruction. To provide a realistic prospect of this, the Council proposes giving much greater importance to the final report. The status of the final report will increase because it will contain important information, such as the results of theory and practical tests in years 6 (ages 9 and 10), 7 (ages 10 and 11) and 8 for arithmetic and language; the results of theory and practical tests in years 6, 7 and 8 for other learning areas and subjects; the result of the final test in February and the school's recommendation on the pupil's choice of secondary education; progress report on results for February-June; any admission tests, trial classes; appraisal of social and cultural efforts and skills; and any other remarks that are relevant for the pupil's continuing education.