

All about the student. An exploration of student-centred education from the perspective of the public importance of education

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The arguments in favour of student-centred education are not new. They are based on the premise that education should be more closely geared to the needs of individuals. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has asked the Education Council of the Netherlands to provide a report on this topic. The main question addressed by the Council was: What does it mean to put the student at the centre of the educational process and where does this ambition encounter limits?

The notion of 'student-centred education' covers a wide range of different meanings, intentions and interpretations. The Council has explored this diversity by arguing that the idea plays a role in four different discussions: about the *goals* of education, about the *design* and *delivery* of education, about the *organisation* of education and about the *education system*.

Is the ambition to put the student at the centre of educational processes and practices a good thing? The answer crucially depends on what is meant by this ambition and what one is seeking to achieve. The Council believes, therefore, that proposals that seek to put the student at the centre of the educational process need to be clear about what is meant by this ambition and what the envisaged purpose is.

Against this background, the Council has reflected on the limits, dilemmas and potential paradoxes of student-centred education. The Council highlights two tensions: the tension between the preferences of individuals and groups and the wider interests of society, and the tension between freedom of choice and equality of opportunity.

The Council stresses that education must serve both the interests of individuals and groups and of society at large. Individual students and their parents have an interest in education that meets their needs. Seen from this perspective, there are arguments for basing the design of education on the preferences of individual students and their parents and the groups and communities of which they are part. While the Council supports differentiated and flexible education that meets the interests and capacities of children and young adults, education also has a responsibility to society as a whole, which includes concern for social cohesion, democracy, general well-being, economic growth and prosperity. The Council believes that this imposes limits on what pupils and their parents want from education. Where individual preferences clash with the public role of education, the Council argues that the public interest should prevail.

The Council urges all stakeholders – students, parents, teachers, school leaders, governors, supervisors, policymakers and politicians – not to lose sight of the societal implications of putting students

at the centre. In doing so, the Council is seeking to support schools that find themselves under pressure to meet the wishes and demands of individuals and groups.

The government also has a responsibility for protecting the public interest of education. The Council believes that the public interest should take precedence when formulating educational policy. Where student-centred education is pursued at the expense of social cohesion, accessibility and equal opportunities, the public role of education is jeopardised.