

Select later, differentiate better

Every pupil must be given the opportunity to develop, learn and obtain a qualification to the utmost of their ability. That applies equally for gifted pupils, precocious and fast learners, as well as for children who do not learn so fast or so easily, and for late-bloomers. However, the early selection and external differentiation into different school types that characterise the Dutch education system are putting a strain on equal educational opportunity.

Over the last decade, in particular, the combination of early selection and external differentiation that characterises the Dutch education system has become problematic. So much so that it is now jeopardising good access to education and impeding the contribution that education makes to equal opportunities and social cohesion. Accordingly, the Dutch Education Council recommends that selection be deferred until later, so that pupils are given more time and opportunity to develop their capacities. The Council also recommends improving internal differentiation: start offering more flexible education in primary school which better reflects the differences between pupils.

These problems cannot be adequately resolved within the existing education system, and the Education Council therefore recommends structural reform for secondary education.

Background: equal educational opportunities under pressure

Equal opportunity in education has been the subject of frequent public debate in recent years. Those working in education, as well as policymakers and politicians, scientists and the media have all sought to highlight inequality of opportunity in education and debated ways of creating a more equal system. The coronavirus crisis has deepened concerns about inequality of opportunity; the pandemic has exacerbated existing differences, with pupils and students who were already vulnerable facing extra difficulty due to the Covid crisis.

In its report on excessive differentiation in the Dutch education system (*Doorgesloten differentiatie in het onderwijsstelsel. Stand van educatief Nederland 2019*), the Education Council observed that the combination of

early selection and strong differentiation acts as a pincer, putting pressure on equal educational opportunities. Following the report, politicians at the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science accordingly asked the Council to carry out a study of differentiation and selection in the education system in the light of equality of opportunity and educational quality. This report answers the question: How can differentiation and selection in the education system better serve the capacities of all pupils?

Problem areas: early selection and excessive differentiation

The Dutch education system selects pupils at around the age of 12 for allocation to different secondary school types. In many other countries, this selection only occurs at age 15 or 16. Education systems with early selection are generally bad for the career development, educational achievement and non-cognitive functioning (e.g. socialisation and motivation) of pupils. Early selection and allocation to a highly differentiated system of secondary education, as in the Dutch system, is also found to have a negative impact on equal educational opportunity. Early selection does not work out well for pupils whose birthday falls early in the school year, pupils from less advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds and late-bloomers, who are at greater risk of not ending up in the type of secondary education that most suits their capabilities. Early selection can on the other hand have positive effects for pupils with strong cognitive abilities.

As well as its early selection, the Dutch education system is also seen internationally as highly externally differentiated, with far-reaching categorisation into different school types such as preparatory secondary vocational education (VMBO) or pre-university education (VWO). The question is whether this high level of differentiation properly reflects the genuine differences in pupils' capacities. It has also led to an increase in path-dependency, so that where pupils start in the secondary education system increasingly determines the further progression of their school career. Accumulation of qualifications and changing school type mid-stream are difficult and have become increasingly dependent on the education level of pupils' parents. Pupils with low-educated parents have fewer opportunities in this system. There are fewer combined schools offering all school types on the same campus, with different education types often being provided at separate sites. This also puts pressure on the socialisation function of education: pupils from different backgrounds no longer get to know each other because they do not meet each other at school. The path-dependency also increases due to the sharp separation

between vocational and general education. This in turn puts great pressure on the transition from primary to secondary education and causes a lot of stress for pupils (and their parents), who want to enter the secondary education system at the highest possible level.

Advice: select later, differentiate better

Early selection in combination with pronounced external differentiation carries risks for the accessibility of education, for equal educational opportunities and for the socialisation function of education. These risks cannot be accommodated within the present education system. The Council accordingly advises later selection and better differentiation, i.e. more internal differentiation (more flexible, customised) and less external differentiation. Achieving this will require structural reforms in secondary education.

Scrap school recommendation for primary year 8 (11-12 year-olds)

Defer selection of year 8 pupils for a specific secondary education form until after they have completed the first three years of secondary school. This would mean scrapping the present school recommendation and final test in year 8 of primary school (11-12 year-olds). Pupils in primary year 8 would then go on to secondary school without selection, in a 'soft transfer'.

Selection at the end of a broad, three-year bridging period

Secondary education would begin with a three-year bridging period in which pupils with a range of capacities are taught together. Schools would have a flexible programme which matches pupils' abilities and is appropriate for their stage of development. Subjects are taught at different cognitive levels. Teachers can differentiate in terms of lesson content, process and setting. They do this for individual pupils or groups based on their performance, capacities or interests. The Council specifically draws attention to the needs, capacities and potential of pupils with strong cognitive abilities: the teaching should be better tailored to the needs of these pupils before they leave primary school, and this should continue during the three-year bridging period. This tailoring would affect both the teaching content and the educational/didactic approach. This would mean that later selection also offers added value for pupils with strong cognitive abilities.

As in the present lower secondary school, pupils would follow a common foundation programme during the three-year bridging period to ensure they are able to function well in society and to prepare them for upper secondary school. This might include teaching basic knowledge and skills in the Dutch and English languages and arithmetic/mathematics. Lower secondary school is also a period of orientation and choice; (school) career orientation and guidance are important here. A three-year bridging period would give pupils the time to discover what kind of education would be best for them to follow after secondary school. This would increase the chance that pupils end up in the right education stream in upper secondary school, which matches their capabilities and interests. At the end of the bridging period, pupils would then be selected for the most appropriate education track in upper secondary school.

Selection based on standardised tests and broad information

The Council not only recommends later selection but also that the selection process be organised differently, by incorporating testing in continuous learning pathways and combining standardised testing with a broad spectrum of information input. Teaching teams would use this as a basis to formulate a recommendation for the most appropriate education track in upper secondary school. Having several testing moments, incorporating different sources and encouraging discussion in teaching teams will help ensure systematic and robust selection and testing. Broader testing would also better reflect the capacities of pupils and reduce the incentive for test training and 'teaching to the test'.

Adaptations in lower secondary school have consequences for upper secondary education. The Council recommends that the consequences for the structure of upper secondary school be carefully thought through, and suggests four principles to guide this process. First: maintain the flexibility from the three-year bridging period; second: reduce external differentiation; third: link final qualifications to an initial qualification; and fourth: maintain the good working relationships between general secondary education and senior secondary vocational education.

Conditions: equip schools properly, ensure a comprehensive educational offer and create an appropriate legislative and regulatory environment

Later selection and better differentiation demand a good deal of primary and secondary school teachers and school heads. The proposed changes in the structure of parts of the secondary education system are also radical. The Council sees a number of conditions that must be met for successful realisation. Schools must be adequately equipped in terms of staffing, financial resources, time, knowledge and skills. Teachers must be given the time and space they need to develop their subject knowledge and educational/didactic skills to enable them to apply flexible differentiation in the classroom. Adequately equipping schools also requires adequate legislative frameworks. Finally, introducing a broad, three-year bridging period at every school location will require secondary school boards to change the layout of their schools and to engage in regional coordination or collaboration to achieve this.

The full advisory report “Later selecteren, beter differentiëren” and related studies (in Dutch) can be found at www.onderwijsraad.nl/later-selecteren-beter-differentieren

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