Early Childhood Education in the Netherlands: The first steps

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Introduction

Spanning a period of eight years, from age four to twelve, Dutch primary education is among the minority of systems worldwide that integrate the education of younger children into the primary school. This chapter begins by describing the genesis of the current structure of Dutch primary education. It explains the arguments for integrating kindergarten into the primary school, and the initial hurdles experienced. In light of current national debate regarding the establishment formal linkages between the education and care of even younger children (aged two to four) and primary schools, this chapter also describes the current system of preschool education as well as curricula for children in the two to six year age range. Finally, it features a discussion of major opportunities and threats posed by the current structures, along with the rationale behind our call for the harmonization of Dutch preschool and primary education systems.

The structures of schooling in the Netherlands

A brief history of Dutch kindergarten

After 30 years of formally separate schooling, the Dutch education system integrated kindergarten classes into a new, eight-year primary schooling system in 1985. The unification idea was initially proposed by the Dutch teacher's association (the forerunner of the current teachers' union). The main reason behind this new movement was the enormous number of grade repeaters following the transition from nursery school into first grade.

For several reasons, the integration was met with initial resistance. First, teachers of four and five year olds feared that the integration with the primary school might prompt the loss of essential characteristics of their classrooms, such as: (1) attention for social development of children, especially through attention and time for play; and (2) developing the independence, stimulated by work corners, being able to choose and clean up one's own material, and flexible forms of collaboration. Second, many teachers feared that inappropriate performance pressure would be placed on children too early (learning to read, learning to count) as a result of integrating classes in the primary school. And indirectly, a dominant concern was that those activities would press the more developmentally appropriate ones out of the already fully-packed curriculum.

Such concerns were, in part, fed by the fact that teacher qualifications were not adjusted as part of the integration. Primary school teachers held a higher degree than nursery school teachers (those teaching four-five year olds). At the time of the integration, primary school teachers were automatically granted the qualifications to teach the four

and five year olds; whereas nursery school teachers were not granted the qualifications to teach upper grades in the primary school. Those wishing to teach older children were required to complete a special bridge course. The concern was that teachers from the older grades would take over the kindergarten classes, using the more teacher-centered and subject-dependent approaches to which they were accustomed. Finally, much resistance also stemmed from simultaneous budget cuts in education.

In hindsight, most would likely say that the concerns were far greater than any actual problems (although there are still those who remain opposed to the changes). For years to come, the kindergarten classes remained dominated by teachers with a nursery school background. Now, a generation further, most older teachers and certainly the new younger teachers are qualified to teach in all classes of the school. In the last two decades, quality has visibly improved: in 2005, 2.4% of children repeat group 3 or stay in group 2 for an extra year, compared to 11% repeating first grade (now group 3) in 1985; and international studies on reading have seen the Netherlands jump from 21st to 2nd place in that time. Countering the budget cuts of the 1980's, government spending – when corrected for inflation – now shows an average per child investment having grown from 3000 Euro to 3900 Euro.

It should be noted, however, that concerns about children being pressured, for example, to read earlier, were not entirely unfounded. Compared to systems in other countries with broader developmental goals, the current Dutch kindergarten system tends to place greater emphasis on cognitive development (OECD, 2006b). Although not the national standard, this tendency is illustrated through the newspaper photo in Figure 1, which shows kindergarteners from one of 26 schools in the Dutch city of Enschede, participating in a pilot program that begins reading education when four-year-olds start school.

The current primary school

Even though Dutch primary education is mandatory from age five, 98% of children begin school at age four (Schreuder, Hoex, and van der Pijl, 2005). All children, also those with behavioral or learning problems, are accepted into the regular primary schools. For children with highly specific needs, such as those with serious mental or physical handicaps, there are separate, special schools.

In the Netherlands, there are some seven thousand primary schools funded with tax money. Aside from a small number of private schools, which are not financed by the government, there are three main types of publicly-funded schools in the Netherlands: public-authority schools, denominational schools and alternative schools. Public-authority schools are mostly run by a school board, a foundation or by a legal person appointed by the city council. Open to all children and not shaped on the basis of a denomination or philosophy of life, these schools educate about one third of all children. Denominational and alternative schools are run as an association, of which parents can become members, or as a foundation. About two thirds of all children go to denominational or alternative schools. Most of the denominational schools are Roman Catholic or Protestant, although

Figure 1: Kindergarten children working with their wordboxes
(Reprinted with permission from: De Twentsche Courant Tubantia, 25-4-2007)

there are also Jewish, Islamic, Hindu and humanistic schools. Alternative schools organize their education according to certain pedagogical principles, such as Montessori, Jenaplan, Dalton and Freinet.

Special provisions are available for all four-six year old children of parents with low educational background. Through the 60 million Euro in lump-sum financing they receive from the national government, schools are responsible for providing extra measures to needy children. Recent policy measures have been taken to increase the percentage of the target population being reached (currently 69%).

Dutch pre-schools today

Research has shown that children who participate in high quality programs reap short and long term benefits, (Barnett, 1995; van Kampen, Kloprogge, Rutten, and Schonewille, 2005; Leseman, Otter, Blok and Deckers, 1998), and cost-benefit studies also demonstrate that the investment is economically sound (Cleveland and Krashinski, 2003); both of these results are highest among very disadvantaged children. The Dutch preschool system targets disadvantaged children, with central aims of preventing and mitigating educational deficiencies. For example, many two and three year old children are lagging behind in language development because they speak poor Dutch, and/or receive little (Dutch) stimulation at home. Preschool programs therefore often emphasize language development. Pre-school programs target two and three year old children from parents of low educational background; 45% of this target group currently reached. Dutch research

has shown that programs with a developmental orientation can enhance language and cognitive abilities of children in the target group, and that the impact concerns *foundational* cognitive abilities as well as domain-specific school readiness skills (van Tuijl and Leseman, 2007).

From a policy perspective, early childhood education is a relatively new area of attention in the Netherlands as the first formal rulings and subsidies date from 2000, with frequent changes since then. Local authorities have been charged with the responsibility for implementing and running pre-school programs with the 110 million Euro they receive per year from the national government, as well as the income from parent contributions (subsidized and non-subsidized program structures are in place). It is noteworthy that no formal qualification or certification is required for working with young children in the Netherlands. In fact, current efforts to develop degree programs for early childhood workers are considered ground-breaking. Most preschool staff have a broad background in social work, with limited (if any) explicit concentration on early childhood; there are also many parent-volunteers with no formal qualifications in a related field.

Pre-school in the Netherlands is separated from day care. The pre-schools of today evolved from volunteer-run neighborhood playgroups that began to be established in the 1960's and 1970's to socialize and stimulate children; whereas the main rationale behind day care centers has been to allow parents (mothers) to work. While most day care providers nationwide now have pedagogical policies in place, few implement clearly defined curricular programs. In fact, the mere title of year's national symposium on «the sense and nonsense of pedagogy in daycare» may forecast hurdles to be faced by the new government in realizing its intention to harmonize legislation for pre-school and day care provisions.

Curricula

Ready-made programs

Most Dutch pre-schools use ready-made curricular programs, selected by either the local government or the organization itself. Many programs are designed across the pre-school-kindergarten ranges, while some specifically target the two-three age range. Pre-school curricula vary in nature and content and have been developed by a wide variety of individuals and organizations. Some programs are more comprehensive (Kaleidoscoop, Piramid), while others focus more on certain areas such as language development (Taallijn), or social-emotional development (Startblokken). In addition to center-based programs, there has also been a movement toward home-based programs (Kruipgroep; Bij de hand; Stap rond; Spel aan huis; Rugzak; Spel- en boekenplan; Samen rekenen; Samen taal; Instapje; Opstap; Jij bent belangrijk) or programs for special needs children (Portage Programma Nederland; Feuerstein methode; Kleine stapjes).

Research has shown that home-based programs are generally less effective than center-based programs, but still worthwhile. A recent international meta-study examining cognitive as well as social-emotional gains indicates that center-based or combination center/

home-based programs, are the most effective (Blok, Fukkink, Gebhardt, and Leseman, 2005). Evaluation research on the three most prevalent programs in the Netherlands show clear cognitive gains for children attending the Kaleidoscope (Dutch version of High Scope) and Piramid programs (Schonewille, Kloprogge, and van der Leij, 2000; Veen, Roeleveld, and Leseman, 2000) and socio-emotional gains for children participating in Startblokken (Veen, Fukkink, and Roeleveld, 2006). Used by 64% of Dutch preschools, the Piramid program is the most popular pre-school program in the Netherlands (Kloprogge, 2003). Piramid, briefly described in Box 1, was developed by educationist dr. Jef J. van Kuyk and his team from the CITO institute for testing and assessment, in close collaboration with preschool and kindergarten teachers.

Ready-made program example: Piramid

Designed for children from three to seven years old, the Piramid program provides a safe play-learn environment in which children can take initiative in play and independent learning. While variations are available for children who require additional support, such as language development, the core program addresses the following developmental areas:

1. *Developing observation skills:* all senses – feeling, tasking, smelling seeing and hearing with the aid of illustrative material. Sensory development is seen as an important condition for further development
2. *Personality development:* abilities to cope, independence, self-control and perseverance
3. Social-emotional development: learning to deal with feelings such as happy, sad, angry, scared; social behavior as defensibility, cooperation and collaborative play
4. *Cognitive development and numeracy:* Ordening, sorting, classification, seriation, numbers, counting, comparing and simple operations.
5. *Language development and development of reading and writing:* communicating with other children is important, but also communicating with adults, working on vocabulary development, interactive reading aloud and pre-reading and writing
6. *Orientation to space and time and world exploration:* sense of space and time, learning spatial and temporal concepts and experiencing these aspects of the world through projects
7. *Motor development:* fine motor skills (drawing, writing, using markers, pencils, scissors) and gross motor skills (jumping, aiming, swimming, dancing)
8. *Artistic development:* visual development, working with clay, pain, paper, textiles and aspects such as color, shape, light and space; musical development including songs, tempo, rhythm, tone and volume

The play-learn environment sets the stage and the method offers structure. Challenging materials and activity corners ensure that children can take initiative, discover and explore in all the developmental areas. Pyramid is a project-based method; each project has a structure with activities, applications, ideas, games, songs and other options.

Box 1: Piramid program characteristics

Standards and assessment

As previously mentioned, major restructuring of the Dutch education system was enacted in 1985, including the integration of kindergarten classes into the primary school. While global subject areas to be addressed were documented, it was not until 1993 that national core objectives for primary school were established. Staying apace with changing

needs in society these core objectives have gone through three generations of revision, the most recent being published in 2006 (Greven and Letschert, 2006). With the aim of contributing to individual as well as societal development, the 58 objectives in the framework help schools shape their own curricular decisions in the following areas: Dutch, English and Friesan languages; mathematics; personal and world orientation; artistic orientation and movement. To help teachers determine how their pupils will meet these objectives, several institutions have developed interim objectives and learning trajectories (e.g. the Freudenthal Institute for Science and Mathematics Education; the National Expertise Center for the Dutch Language and the National Expertise Center for Curriculum Development, often in collaboration). Relevant to this chapter are those created for emergent literacy (Verhoeven and Arnoutse, 1999) and emergent numeracy (Treffers, van den Heuvel-Panhuizen, and Buys, 1999; van den Heuvel-Panhuizen and Buys, 2004). While state-of-the-art comprehensive and well-illustrated publications, complete with video case examples, are available for working with the interim objectives, the state-of-practice is that the majority of primary schools are only beginning to seriously examine their use. The teaching and learning of young children remains predominantly shaped by the ready-made curricula described in the previous section, only a handful of which are clearly linked with the national (interim) goals. Similarly, learning is most often tested, assessed and monitored through the products of a few companies and publishers; few of which have (yet) been designed to align with the national (interim) goals.

Discussion

Largely informal infrastructure

The largely informal infrastructure for preschool education offers several opportunities, but also poses threats to a healthy system. Locally organized, grass-roots initiatives are often characterized by their local sustainability. They also tend to be more able to reach into (impoverished) communities than initiatives organized on broader scales. A potentially positive function of the current – highly varied – system is the diversity and choice for the participants, as well as numerous opportunities to study different scenarios in practice. Finally, the informal infrastructure allows relationships to take their own course. For example, when it comes to exploring ways to shape preschool-primary school cooperation, the current system is conducive to trying out new ideas.

While the opportunities of the current system are worthy of consideration, the threats posed by its informal nature seem greater. If everyone is a little accountable for early childhood education, no one is completely accountable. Although sharing responsibility may be desirable, shared accountability is generally risky. Further, such a fragmented system can suffer from inefficiencies (Broekhof, 2006). The downside of the highly varied program quality, mentioned above, is that it often means unpredictable program quality. Finally, continuity is essential to easing transition to primary school; it would seem nearly impossible to improve this situation without some formal ties into the education system in place.

Professional development of early childhood educators

Between 2006–2010, 45 million Euro will be invested in early childhood to help increase participation of 90,000 to 130,000 children. By 2010, 70% of all preschool and primary school target group children, should be participating in early education programs, and bridging classes should be available for 36,000 children who start school with deficiencies (OCW, 2006). While clearly laudable, a crucial consideration with regard to these goals relates to staffing. The field already suffers from an inadequate level of professionalism (Broekhof, 2006) and staff shortages due to relatively low status, uncertain career paths, poorer working conditions and wages (OECD, 2006a). Without well-educated teachers, how are these goals to be met? The Dutch government has earmarked 18 million Euro for the inservice education of 5,000 preschool teachers (Versterk program), starting in 2007. As a clear commitment, it shows a promising start. But the need for serious consideration of upgrading and expanding preservice (preschool) teacher education, with commensurate salaries, has also been called for by experts from the field (Leseman, 2002; Meijnen, 2006; van Essen, 2007; van Kampen et al., 2005).

The role of research

The field of early childhood education research has a well-established history with its roots in the domains of psychology and family studies. It boasts a strong history of insights in learning behaviors and development. The field is respected in the scientific community, and rates of return on investment studies speak the language of policy-makers. At the same time, however, the field of early childhood education research is also impoverished in several areas. In addition to essential research on economic returns (Barnett, 2006) and program effectiveness (Blok et al., 2005; Leseman, 2002; Leseman, Rollenberg, and Rispens, 2001; Veen et al., 2006; Veen et al., 2000), there is also a growing need for research that highlights the implementation perspective of interventions in young children's classrooms (Fukkink and Lont, 2007, in press; Peters, Droop, Biemond, and Verhoeven, 2006). With the exception of landmark research such as the OECD Starting Strong studies (Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2006b) research into the structures of early childhood educational systems is limited. Finally, the lack of scientific research dedicated to understanding and improving the professionalization of early childhood educators is remarkable. If large-scale changes in the schooling of young children are to be made, then efforts are warranted to strengthen the scientific basis for shaping such interventions.

Closing comments

The current structure of early childhood education is not internally consistent. While quality in preschools is a priority, sampling shows wide, often unpredictable, variety in quality. Similarly, education of teachers is highly varied, and their skill sets differ accordingly. In line with recent expert advice to the national government, (van Kampen et al., 2005), we argue that restructuring school entrance should address the need for high quality care for all children, not only the disadvantaged. Through ties with daycares and preschools, starting at age two, children of all backgrounds should be offered developmentally appropriate opportunities to learn and grow. Barnett's (2006) conservative calculations, based on reviews of evidence on program effects and economic returns data,

show that universal programs are found to yield higher net benefits than targeted programs (substantially higher for the most disadvantaged children); and that social and emotional gains (as opposed to cognitive gains) account for most of the economic return. It is important that new structures incorporate a balanced curriculum that stimulates essential school readiness skills and related attitudes such as: self-regulation; interest and ability to get along with others; responsibility; and creative problem solving. Further, it is essential that programs initiated in early years be continued into primary school (cf. Leseman, Otter, Blok and Deckers, 1999).

Dutch kindergarten was once referred to as the «bewaarschool», implying that the school's main priority was to «keep» the children. Now, decades later, we are tempted to laugh at this notion, when we look at the strong pedagogical vision that shapes these classrooms. Unfortunately, however, the «keeping place» concept is alive and well in some preschools and many daycares. But there is hope. The current Dutch cabinet clearly intends to invest in improving the continuity between preschool, daycare and primary schooling, as evidenced by this year's unification of the responsibilities for daycare and education together under one ministry.

A recent survey conducted by the Dutch Institute for Applied Social Sciences and the Dutch Education Union examined primary school teacher views (n=1985) on connecting early childhood programs (both daycare and preschool) with primary school (Sikkes and van Kessel, 2007). The survey found that:

- Slightly more than half of the teachers responding strongly support the strengthening of connections between early childhood programs and primary school, with one third against the idea and a small group remaining neutral.
- The vast majority holds the view that transition to primary school will be facilitated, and slightly more than half cite this as an opportunity to shape continuous developmental and learning trajectories.
- Reminiscent of the concerns voiced in 1985 when kindergarten was integrated with the primary school, the fear of pressuring children and taking time away for playing is present among about half of the respondents, although more so prevalent among older teachers.

There is no question that the Netherlands shares the deep-rooted division between care and education (Bennett, 2003) that is common in many countries. However, results from the survey described above imply that educators are ready to explore ways of strengthening connections. Government policy changes and investments demonstrate a commitment to improving continuity between preschool, daycare and primary school education. As advocates of a system that offers developmentally appropriate opportunities to all children starting at age two, we find this an exciting and important time to consider restructuring school entrance, in the Netherlands and abroad.

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