

# Europe and the Netherlands: challenges and constraints of mutual education policy

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## Introduction

In the introductory pages of this CIDREE yearbook the Flemish director-general of secondary education Hostens gives us an illuminative analysis of what he calls "the game of educational policymaking in Europe". During the last decennium there has been a development of a soft approach to a more common educational policy, with greater respect for the identities and policies of the member states of the European Union. With instruments such as the Open Method of Coordination, peer consultancy, indicators and benchmarking, the prudent but ongoing process of adjustment is facilitated and guided. The final outcome is focused on the pursuit to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world.

Dutch society is a purebred European community in miniature. Originally the development of the nation took place in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, in a melting pot of cultural diversity. Since that time the Netherlands has been a free haven for artists, scientists and others, persecuted because of their opinions in their country of origin.

Besides that the Netherlands are and have always been a trading nation, focussed on the world outside their own borders. This characterizes two features of Dutch mentality: a desire for freedom and tolerance, and an open mind to the world beyond<sup>1</sup>. An example of the latter is the Dutch willingness to speak and understand, within certain limits, several foreign languages. The Netherlands is the largest of the smaller EU member states, politically and geographically bounded by the three largest ones: Germany, England

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Zahn, originally a Tsjech scientist, and between 1963 -1981 professor of economic sociology in Amsterdam, emphasises the open, easy and tolerant attitude of the Dutch. In his view the Dutch are practical, business oriented and they have the moral willingness to take care of the world around them. Because of that attitude the Dutch - not necessarily the politicians - are indispensable in Zahn's eyes, for the development of a common Europe. See: Zahn, E. (1984) *Das unbekannte Holland*. Berlin: Siedler.

and France. If the Dutch want to maintain pace with these others, then there is only one prescription: that of ensuring that the quality of our input of expertise into the educational sector can literally be understood. (It is a well-known fact that English as a world language is spoken by 47% of the EU citizens, German by 32% and French 27%. In contrast, Dutch is spoken by only 7% of EU citizens).

Education should prepare young people for a useful and social function in their future life situations. They will live in a world with fading borders and this certainly applies to Europe. Over the last few years a substantial impetus has been given to the internationalisation of Dutch education by cross border cooperation with neighbouring countries and by the possibilities offered by major community programmes, such as the Socrates and Leonardo projects. In addition, or even better, in relationship with this cooperation, there is a national innovation policy, aimed at structural inclusion of cross curricular themes, such as the European and international dimension, in the regular school curriculum and in teacher training programmes. So, Europe is on the agenda of Dutch education policy, but how open will Europe be to the features of Dutch education? Will Europe offer wider perspectives for further development, or will it be in the final analysis a straightjacket?

In this essay we look at the interpretation of quality development and quality assurance in Dutch education from the perspective of the features that characterize Dutch mentality (sensitivity to freedom, tolerance and respect for the identity and traditions of others). In doing so, we keep in mind the growing tendency towards more autonomy and ownership at the school level, and the consequences of this decentralisation process for a common European education policy. We especially look at the role and position of the curriculum and curriculum development within the processes of change. We elaborate one of the many change processes occurring in Dutch education today. In this case we look closely at the effects of a five-year innovation in upper secondary education.

## **The system**

The Netherlands have, like other European nations, a sophisticated system of education that starts with a continuous period of eight years of primary education. Since 1985 the separated system of nursery education and primary has been integrated into a new system of primary education. Formal compulsory education starts at the age of five, and there has been a debate to bring this age down to four, since almost all children attend primary school as from this age. Dutch primary education is obligatory

for all children. All children, including those with behavioural or learning problems, are accepted at regular primary schools. For children with highly specific needs, such as those with serious mental or physical handicaps, there are separate, special schools. Before primary education different types of day-care and pre-schooling are available, most of which operate on a private base.

After primary school, most pupils go on to pre-vocational secondary education (vmbo), to general secondary education (havo), or pre-university education (vwo). These three types of education start with a period of common basic education. Pre-vocational secondary education was introduced in 1999. It takes four years and is mainly intended to be a preparation for upper secondary vocational education. General secondary education takes five years and is mainly meant to be a preparation for higher professional education. Pre-university education takes six years and is a preparation for university. All levels have four subject combinations (profiles). Besides that there is a segment of the pupil population that lacks the ability to obtain a qualification. There is a special form of employment-oriented training for them. Compulsory education lasts until the end of the school year in which students reach the age of sixteen.

## **Freedom as a feature**

The Dutch educational system provides wide ranging freedoms for schools. Citizens have the freedom and right to set up schools based on their religious conviction, social principles, or their educational or pedagogical views and preferences. As a result there is a wide range of schools in the Netherlands from which parents can make a choice for their children. When the foundation requirements have been met - an important criterion being the minimum number of children attending the school - schools are entitled to equal funding by the government. In comparison with many other countries, schools in the Netherlands have a wide range of freedom concerning educational content and the pedagogic and didactic approach. Schools have room for their own educational concept, they have their own educational policy, they choose their own teaching resources, and they distribute the school hours as they see fit.

The government's limit to interfere with the content of education through central regulations has its origins in article 23 of the Constitution. In this article the freedom of education is guaranteed. Although this article was introduced in 1917, the Dutch people are still very much attached to this

freedom with respect to founding schools and support organisations. However, the Netherlands are not the only nation with a sophisticated respect for freedom in education. Together with Belgium, Austria, Denmark, England and Wales and New Zealand, the Dutch belong to a group of countries that allows above average freedom at the meso-level (De Groof & Glenn, 2002).

## **Curricular aims and content**

In light of the freedom of education, it is hardly surprising that the central regulations regarding curricular content are modest. The Primary Education Act for instance, regulates only a few guidelines for content and the organisation of education. Subjects and areas of attention mentioned include arithmetic, language, history and geography, art education and sensory and physical development. However, what should be taught in those subjects or areas of attention is not indicated in this Act. Neither is there legislation with respect to the time to be devoted to each of the subjects.

Much is left to the school itself and to writers and publishers of textbooks and other educational resources. The freedom with respect to the content has been curtailed since 1993, when core objectives were introduced. Core objectives describe the outline of what each school must offer its pupils. In 1998 the core objectives were revised. At this very moment the third generation of core objectives is under construction for primary education and for basic education. There is a trend to formulate the objectives even more globally than in previous years. The objectives can be considered as an articulation of the intentions of society regarding the nature and content of the school, rather than as a detailed programme of study. There is also a tendency to formulate the core objectives under wider headings. In the current format of description the subject structure has disappeared and is restructured in a model of learning areas.

In secondary education there are timetables and regulations with respect to examinations. Freedom is much more limited than in primary education. However, for the whole system it is true that what has been formally laid down by law - and often in minute detail -, concerns the conditions under which education takes place and the issues concerning funding.

## Trend towards more autonomy

In the last decennia a lot of changes have occurred in Dutch society especially in the field of education. The way in which the government wants to take responsibility moves towards the direction of a shared responsibility with owners of different levels in the education field. There is a concrete movement, also internationally recognizable, towards more autonomy at the school level<sup>2</sup> and the growing influence of market orientation. Originally this autonomy was focused at or limited to the level of the organisation of the school.

In the policy field there is some discord about the curricular consequences with respect to the growing tendency of autonomy. On the one hand there is a tendency towards a firmer grip on the curricular content. There are pleas for the development of output standards, more accountability and the carrying out of the principles of the so-called effective school. The tendency to a more severe regulation of the content of education certainly finds its roots in the wish to compare the quality of education with other western oriented nations and the efforts to develop a common education policy in Europe. A more or less common policy needs criteria and benchmarking for purposes of comparison and ranking.

On the other hand there is a growing feeling in the post-modern society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that complex issues such as education are not to be couched in the seeming security of rational, logical and centrally mastered and comparative systems.

The concept of schooling is changing. The Dutch Social Cultural Planning Office (CPB) (Bronneman-Helmers & Taes, 1999) has observed that schools are under severe pressure. This is a finding of their research of the tasks of schools in a changing society. Traditional allocation of tasks between schools, families, authorities and agencies outside the school is no longer obvious. Education becomes more and more a plaything for society.

There is a growing need for more responsibility and trust in the reliability of the teacher. The need for more autonomy at the school level however has also to do with a shift in thinking regarding learning and teaching and alters our focus from the central level to the meso level and even more to the responsibility of the micro level where education really takes place.

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<sup>2</sup> see: the International Review of Curriculum and Assessment Frameworks Archive [www.inca.org.uk](http://www.inca.org.uk)

## Ways of quality assurance

Especially within a context that tends towards more autonomy and diversity there is a need for transparency and accountability. The basic reason is to convince yourself (as a nation, as a responsible minister of education, as a school, as a teacher, as a parent) that you are doing the right things for the generation of youngsters for whom you are responsible, or to put forward your evidence as to why you should change your efforts into another direction.

Just like other countries, the Netherlands has a sophisticated system of quality assurance, survey and control. We are not striving for a complete overview of all the measurements here, but the following examples give an idea of the range of activities at different levels of concern.

### Periodical review

At the request of the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Educational Assessment (Cito-group) carries out a periodical survey of quality in primary education and has done for over ten years now. The survey concerns domains of learning in primary school and takes place in grade eight (which is the last year of primary school). The aim is to describe the final level reached by a majority of pupils in certain areas of learning. Besides that there is survey half way through primary school, dealing with Dutch language and arithmetic. It is relevant to mention that the survey extends over areas, which are not regularly within the domain of such research, including English, music, physical education, traffic education and specific domains such as the writing skills of pupils. The surveys give a detailed answer to questions concerning the results of the educational efforts. There is a relation with the demands of the core objectives. The results of the surveys are distributed to several institutions in the educational field, and to the national and regional institutes in the support structure, the inspectorate, educational publishers and advisory committees. The survey is a kind of trend study to chart what pupils are learning and what possible changes are necessary in the future with regard to developments in society and science.

## International surveys

The Dutch are also participating in international surveys such as TIMSS<sup>3</sup> and PIRLS. Sometimes it is pleasant to notice that one's country is forging ahead in a certain domain. We refer to the results of the recent PIRLS-study<sup>4</sup>. PIRLS is the so-called Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. The Netherlands appeared to be second best in the ranking.

## Visitation

Like in other countries, control at school level is carried out by visitation. The inspectorate is the relevant actor in this respect. Recognizing that the national authorities withdraw from precise regulation of the national curriculum as far as it concerns the content of education, the role of the inspectorate becomes more like a guardian angel with regard to the quality involved. At the moment the inspectors make use of the instrument of regular school supervision (in Dutch: RST). It means that it is the inspectorate's aim to visit the primary school each year. If the inspector's visit gives cause the inspectorate may decide to have an Integral School Supervision (in Dutch: IST). This means a more in-depth review of the school than is possible under RST. Under integral school supervision the inspectorate thoroughly examines the entire primary school by means of an extensive checklist. This checklist includes aspects at both school and classroom level.

The inspectorate has, as has been said, a responsibility to individual schools and each year it describes the state of Dutch education in an annual report. Recently they published the report about the state of education in 2002 (Inspectie van het Onderwijs, 2003). The general conclusion of the report is that the state of education is rather good, but that there is growing concern about the lack of teachers. They also conclude that the level of ambition as described in the treaty of Lisbon as being a nation with high standard knowledge development, does not meet the contemporary situation.

At the moment there is also a debate about the limits of inspectoral responsibility. In some cases the interference of the inspectorate is seen as a too emphatic concern in the field of pedagogical and didactical

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<sup>3</sup> The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS, formerly known as the Third International Mathematics and Science Study).

<sup>4</sup> PIRLS 2001 is the first in a planned 5-year cycle of international trend studies in reading literacy.

issues. The debate is still going on in the Netherlands, but it is certainly an international debate as well (Standaert, 2001).

### **Monitoring systems**

At school level there are other quality measures as well. The government asks schools to meticulously monitor the pupils' development in case their development stagnates so that the problem can be identified in time. It will be obvious that schools should try to solve these problems themselves. Schools are expected to use a system that enables them to monitor the development of their pupils. Most schools with a pupil monitoring system use the one developed by Cito-group, the National Institute for Educational Assessment. Whatever system they use, each school is obliged to monitor the pupils' progress systematically. This has proved to be very conducive to the quality of education.

### **Analysis of textbooks**

Just like everywhere else in the world, teachers in primary education use educational materials (learning materials for children; manuals for teachers, etc). Occasionally teachers produce their own materials, but in most cases they use materials developed by specialist educational publishers. Unlike many other countries, there is no prescribed curriculum for primary education in the Netherlands. Neither is there an authority or agency that prescribes what educational materials schools should use. Schools decide on these matters themselves.

However, in order to get some grip on the quality of educational materials, the government has decided to adopt guidelines for educational materials formulated by the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO). Materials brought onto the market by educational publishers are assessed on a number of criteria, such as:

- do they meet the requirements of the legal core objectives?
- what is their didactic quality?
- do they take the differences between children sufficiently into account?
- do they sufficiently reflect the spirit of the Dutch multicultural society, and is the equality of the sexes (girls/boys) represented to a sufficient degree?
- are they user-friendly? Do they offer value for money?

In a number of guides (for arithmetic/mathematics, language education, environmental studies, etc.) we find descriptions of the outcomes of the analysis of educational materials related to these aspects. It will be

obvious that such a guide is primarily meant for developers of educational materials, but schools, too, may benefit from them, e.g. by choosing from materials that meet the requirements they (the schools) find important.

### **School plan and school guide**

In order to encourage schools to improve their quality in a planned and structured way, the government has set up basic regulations and developed instruments by means of which this can be achieved without endangering the schools' freedom to organise the educational process according to their own preferences. As of January 1999, each school for primary and secondary education must have a school plan, a school guide and rules for lodging complaints. In these documents the school gives an outline of what it promises to do.

Once every four years, each school must make its own school plan. This plan is a document in which the school's policy with respect to the quality of education is described. It deals with education policy, staff policy and internal quality control and it is meant to stimulate an integrated policy with respect to quality and forms the basis for discussing that policy within the school. The school plan is also a document in which the school gives an account of its policy in relation to the inspectorate.

In the educational section of the school plan the school can describe which textbooks are used and the reason why, as well as the way in which the school caters for children with specific educational needs. With respect to staff policy the school plan may address such issues as in-service training, counselling and division of tasks and the activities of the staff.

It also deals with collecting data about the quality of education, such as mapping out the learning outcomes or by asking parents' and pupils' opinions about the strengths and weaknesses in education. It is obvious that the school will also indicate what measures are taken to improve the quality.

The school plan is written for the inspectorate, the body that will eventually assess the quality of education in a school. Its real function is to serve as an internal account for the school itself, which is open for discussion within the school.

A school guide, on the other hand, is a document for the outside world. It provides information about the school to parents and other interested parties. In the school guide, the school shows its aims and principles and

the way they are to be achieved. In the school guide the school also describes how it intends to work out its own distinct profile.

### **Procedure for complaints**

Not everything runs smoothly at school. Normally, attempts are made to solve problems and differences of opinion between teachers and parents, between teachers or between teachers and the head through personal discussion. If that is not possible, each school is required to have a procedure through which someone can lodge a complaint. Parents can also lodge complaints through the inspectorate. Certain regulations have been created for this situation.

### **Examinations**

In secondary education there are school examinations and central examinations. Very often the final judgment is based on the results of a combination of school examinations during the year and a culminating final examination, marked by a diploma.

### **Quality: an ambiguous concept**

In spite of the range of quality instruments sketched out above there is no guarantee that by using them you will get the results you aimed at. That applies to national efforts for accountability and transparency, and also to European or broader efforts. Are for instance, the rankings of schools in Dutch newspapers real reflections of quality, or are some schools better in the communication process with the inspectorate than others? Are the fifteen quality indicators of lifelong learning (European Commission, 2002) really objective keystones, or are they an expression of vague western oriented views on the way specific groups in society like to look at the world, "Weltanschauung" as the German word expresses it so adequately?

Recently the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2003) published its advice to the minister of education regarding the consequences of the mutual European quality approach for Dutch education policy. The Council states that the key objectives of the European ministers deliver useful data for comparisons and that they challenge the Netherlands to achieve its aims in a more coherent fashion. Based on their vision of quality the Council concludes that the Netherlands are still far from their stated ambition.

There are many answers related to the question of good education. In our opinion it is a very powerful development that the questions raised are seriously deliberated by the heads of state and the ministers of education, but this does not mean that the answers can be found unilaterally in the elaborations of more or less coincidental committees organised around those indicators. An ongoing debate about the quality and the direction of the development of education in member states of the European Union is profitable, but the proceeds can be easily abrogated by a too-narrow approach. Besides that, quality is a very subjective concept, value-loaded and often approached from different angles.

### **A real shift or a small change of direction?**

If we subscribe the central aim of the contemporarily European education policy, expressed by the heads of states and their ministers, that Europe intends to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, then we should thoroughly reconsider our thinking on education, the structures we are using and our traditional opinions about quality. Most of the school systems in Europe have their roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and they are based on a Cartesian view of the sources and structures of knowledge and on the legacy of the positivists. The challenge every country faces now is how to become a learning society and to ensure that its citizens are equipped with what they really need in this complex society of the demanding 21<sup>st</sup> century.

An important challenge for education policy in this era is how to deal with important changes in opinions about how learning and teaching should take place. You may say that we are at this very moment on the threshold of what is called the "old" and the "new" ways of learning, that is the change from a routinely, behaviouristic based model of learning into a more personally oriented way of constructing knowledge. You can also characterise this shift with the change in concepts from instructivism to constructivism<sup>5</sup>. In this emergent alteration there is a need for another design of the learning environment and a different role for the teacher. The competency of teachers appears unrelated to their control of subject knowledge and the ways to transfer this, but more to the ways they motivate, challenge development and stimulate individual pupils. Transfer of a standardised and codified set of knowledge and skills is less

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<sup>5</sup> See in this respect the first CIDREE-yearbook "Turning the perspective", especially the contribution of Lodewijks (2001) about learning and teaching.

important than provoking questions, challenging imagination and stimulating active learning skills

Teachers are also supposed to be responsible for school development, for reflecting on their own actions, and for having an awareness of the place of the school within the community. As such the changing face of pedagogic, didactics and professionalism automatically conflicts with a strict centralized direction. The implications for education policy are not yet fundamentally clear and crystallized in the Dutch context of education. In fact we see at this moment old instrumentation and new insights struggling to work together, but also a movement to adapt old instruments and develop new instruments for the emergent needs of the new school situation.

## **An example of change**

In the Netherlands we see in the perspective of quality improvement tentative attempts in a new direction. Tentative, because innovations are going slowly and take time, nevertheless we can see them in all layers of the Dutch school system. When we look somewhat closer at one layer, in this case *upper secondary education*, we notice an ongoing tendency to a rather different approach of learning and teaching. At the beginning of the nineties the Dutch government and the world of education were convinced that education should be adapted to the current demands, conceptually as well as regarding didactic structure. For years, complaints had been heard about the poor transition from pre-university education to universities, caused by the lack of study skills, language skills and general knowledge.

These convictions and findings have resulted in a new curriculum for the second stage of pre-university education comprising a broader offering, requiring application of new technology, more independent work and responsibility on the part of the student. The investment required by students was illustrated for the first time when the 40-hour study load was established.

All in all this places higher demands on the students. Right from the start intensification was one of the characteristics of the renewal of pre-university education. This was broadly supported in 1994, when 89% of the teachers considered the intensification of pre-university education justified.

Initially the presumption was that fewer students would be able to meet the demands of the second stage of pre-university education. In a later phase the intensification of the programme was placed in a different

light: broadening (more subjects) with a view to general knowledge, categorization into subject combinations (profiles) and emphasizing active learning methods. However, these requirements had to be achieved by a student population of a size comparable to that which qualified for the old style examination system. The requirements were heightened by broadening the programme, the use of more active and independent learning and because of the heavier study load. At the same time different measures were taken to increase flexibility.

The question is whether these measures do not interfere with the original intentions that played an important role in setting up the "second stage reform". Therefore in the ongoing discussion on the revamping of pre-university education and the transition to university education the current objective will have to be discussed as a crucial policy question in the process of change.

### **Key changes**

Four key changes can be derived from the main characteristics of educational reform:

- more than was previously the case education is now aimed at acquiring skills
- the students will have a more active role in the learning process. The role of the teacher will consequently change to one of supervisor
- the student can process the subject matter at his/her own level and at his/her own speed
- the subject matter is presented in a way that clearly shows the relationships within and between subjects, and is presented as a method of coherent learning.

### **A major innovation process**

Secondary education is in the process of implementing a major educational innovation. In 1999 all schools providing pre-university education introduced sets of subject combinations and the "studiehuis" construction, which requires students to acquire skills and knowledge in a much more independent capacity. Four subject combinations are linked to higher education disciplines.

The four fixed subject combinations, from which students select one, are:

- science and technology
- science and health
- economics and society
- culture and society.

Each combination of subjects consists of:

- a common core of subjects, which is the same for all students
- a specialised compulsory component which is different for each subject combination
- an optional component.

### **Skills directed learning: a new balance**

Knowledge and understanding remain important, but in addition, more attention has to be paid to acquiring skills such as technical, general, social and study skills. What they comprise is described in the new educational objectives. Cross-curricular skills have also been defined. They include gathering, selecting and processing information; reaching one's own standpoint based on arguments; making a work plan; cooperating within a project; orientation on one's own interests and possibilities for the future.

### **Supervised learning**

The student will have more opportunities to master skills if he/she is given a more active role in the process. Therefore the emphasis will shift from classroom instruction to more independent work by the student. The student is stimulated to take as much responsibility as possible and keep track of his/her study progress. In doing so, the student will learn to be aware of his/her own learning process and to adjust where and when necessary. The teacher acts as a supervisor, checking on the student, pointing out progress and deficiencies and helping out if necessary. This approach requires new teaching methods, such as activating teaching methods and giving assignments that are not only to be carried out within, but also outside the school. What kind of assignments are applicable here and which requirements do they have to meet?

### **Differentiated learning**

It is the right of every individual to reach full personal development. Education cannot ignore the differences between individuals. Everybody has strong and weak qualities. One person may be creative, another analytical. One person may perform best individually, another performs better in a group situation. We have to take these differences into account and do as much justice to them as possible in order to make learning advantageous to everybody.

Learning styles can be changed!

This is one of the most difficult tasks that education is facing nowadays. How can you learn to see the differences in children? And how can you

deal with these differences in such a way that they are beneficial to both the child and society?

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) is an important means for differentiated learning. With ICT tools learning materials can be made flexible enough for students to learn at their own speed and at their own level. All the educational publishers are currently working on ICT materials.

### **Coherent learning**

School management is an important driver of the reform process. However, it is the teacher who holds the key to reform. The changes described cannot be realised with teachers working from the isolated positions of their jobs. To be able to do justice to coherent learning teachers need to operate as a team.

Not only the relationship between students and teachers is changing, but also the relationship between the teaching staff and school management. Together management and teaching staff are reflecting on how the developments will be initiated in the school. Together they make choices and together they propagate a pedagogical-didactical vision and address one another on this. Teaching resources are not the exclusive area of concern of the teachers. The school management will also discuss teaching resources, because they have to fit into the vision that has been jointly established.

The fact that so many conditions need to be met makes it clear that the development from teaching towards learning will be a process that takes many years of work. Schools will have to gain considerably more experience before they will be familiar with a different organisation of the educational learning process, also called the learning organisation.

### **Achievements**

Over the last five years of development in adoption and implementation much has been achieved in education. Teachers look out for different teaching/learning methods that allow more room for "*active and independent learning*". The Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO) developed new examination programmes and examples of activating lessons. These lessons are supplemented with didactical guidelines, which were discussed and endorsed. Schools structured their organisation according to the new requirements and adapted of their buildings. According to the inspectorate the following achievements can already be observed:

- *update of the examination programmes*: the implementation of the second stage of secondary education entailed fundamental thinking

by subject development groups regarding the requirements of preparatory higher education from the perspective of the admission requirements of higher education

- *structuring into subject combinations*: the subject combinations are intended to make a student aware of future possibilities in a timely manner. They should offer a clear perspective on the requirements of follow-up education and should improve preparation thereon
- *didactical variation*: the first publications on independent work and learning gave teachers the incentive to evaluate their traditional didactical working methods and they considered to what extent they could structure their lessons so that students would have to be more active in working independently
- *broadening*: the obligation to have more languages, cultural education, natural science orientation and socio-historical introduction intends to broaden the general knowledge of the students. It is positive that students who advance to higher education have had a broader orientation than is required for their choice of study in higher education
- *problems*: bottlenecks are associated with the implementation process in schools and with issues outside the range of influence of the school. These require a central approach. Examples are: the imbalance between the weight of some examination programmes and the available time allotted for students; the lack of facilities, like insufficient possibilities for organisation and preparation by teachers; the lack of autonomy of schools in the process of change and reform.

### **What can be the conclusion after five years of educational reform in higher secondary education?**

This example of quality improvement in higher secondary education shows us the following achievements:

- the majority of schools appreciate the premise of a more active student as well as the conceptual innovations
- schools themselves now take the initiative to change the teaching/learning process
- schools realise that skills should not be trained at the cost of the necessary knowledge in higher education
- the work pressure on teachers is too high
- schools should have more leeway for the development of policy
- the collaboration between secondary and higher education has been considerably improved

- effective implementation of reforms takes time and determination.

The motor for implementation is always formed by those who will implement the concept. Understandably, real curriculum development requires a whole "*motor gang*".

We have placed our emphasis on this specific example, because we believe that sustainable change in a European perspective needs to be nurtured from the efforts in other member countries. Peer consultation between member states, exchange and consultation, with respect for different conditions and time tables will contribute, in our view, to the ambitious aims of the heads of state.

## **The delicate role of curriculum development**

In the example above we have pointed out the necessity of a certain freedom of action for schools and the relevance of ownership and autonomy at school level. We notice that in the international educational area governments strive to grant more autonomy and responsibility to primary and secondary schools so that these have more flexibility and responsibility. Schools get more opportunity for experiments and innovations by testing them in everyday practice. At the same time they are facing clear demands with respect to quality and efficacy. Within that process there is an unmistakable role for curriculum development and curricular support, taking into account that it meets the needs of the teaching problems of teachers. A larger policy profile for schools will support the possibilities for development of individual pupils. The necessity of investments in curriculum renewal has been subscribed too by the Commission of the European Communities.

Growing autonomy has many consequences for the curriculum. Depending on the ability of schools they can arrange initiatives for a unique and specific curriculum policy at school level according to their concept of education. The growing autonomy (room) versus the demands and wishes of the central government (account and results) can be characterised as freedom within constraints. Teams in schools are supposed to contribute on the one hand to the achievement of core objectives, attainment targets, the development of competencies, the implementation of independent learning, and on the other hand they are supposed to determine in what manner they would organise education in exciting, challenging, and innovating ways.

Curriculum development can gain more meaning whenever it profiles itself as a continuous base for development at the various levels of education (macro - meso - micro). Besides that, curriculum development should be constantly aware of the practical relevance of its ambitions within each of the levels of operation. The Netherlands has an educational support system with national institutes. For curriculum development and support there is the Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO). During its existence its position and tasks have changed. From a more or less central operating institute, SLO now supports school development at the base level.

SLO's work is aimed at contributing to school development in the areas of education contents and learning processes. SLO acts as a mediator between the government, determining the policy, and the schools that have to realise that policy. However, in this role SLO is not an extension of the government. On the contrary, SLO wishes to be a partner for schools in the area of conceptual quality improvement initiated by the government.

In a phase characterised by increasing interest, room for deregulation and an increase in autonomy, it appears that innovation policy is also initiated and valued by the schools themselves.

The mission, aims and strategy of SLO are largely determined by the innovation policy of the government and the policy and requests of the schools themselves. Nevertheless, other clients can also be served as long as the work concentrates on education contents, planning and learning processes.

SLO is aware of its role in the natural tension between the government (as the policy makers) and education, which is confronted with the results and/or demands of that policy. In this respect SLO mediates between two parties, who share the common objective to contribute to the improvement of the quality of education and the learning processes. In the working process SLO's main issue is the involvement of schools in development work.

Collaboration with schools in the process of curriculum development has always been the premise of the project activities taken up by SLO. Now the mission of SLO is changing from exclusively indirect support to direct support. The strategy of working in the environment of the school is now more fundamental than ever and more than ever, the teaching profession is at the heart of public interest in the matter. The teacher is the key person in the education processes and the changes that affect them. Recognition of these changes is the most important condition for continuous quality improvement in education. It is obvious that at this

moment considerable attention is being paid to the persisting problems concerning the management of education by managers and boards. All the same, education should be primarily associated with *the teacher*.

## **Why intended changes do not always succeed**

Despite good intentions and efforts not everything that starts with enthusiasm and motivation will succeed. This goes for knowledge development, as well as for the implementation of ideas, products and services. Different reasons can be given for the failure of the intended changes. It is good to have them in mind, especially from the perspective of the European attempts. For example:

- the intended changes were insufficiently conceptualised and it was not clear who was to benefit
- the change did not fit into the school practice and the ambition level was too high, causing teachers to lose their involvement
- the change did not link up with the current school practice and took place in isolation
- there was no adequate long-term support structure with professional coordination, that clarified the roles and responsibilities of teachers, developers and researchers who are working closely together in the school environment
- no implementation policy was formulated at school level, so that everything revolves around the teacher
- the nature of the concept was insufficiently defined in terms of behaviour; continuous interpretations irritated the process
- there was insufficient interest for the subject by pupils and parents and therefore vital support was absent.

More reasons can be added to which implementation research can make a fundamental contribution. It remains curious however that so little is learned from the disappointments and failures of operations throughout the world. Perhaps it is time to have a thorough analysis of the highs and lows of innovations and to ask ourselves the question how realism and pragmatism can be connected to the necessary inspiration of ideals.

## **Globalisation or glocalisation**

In the future internationalisation or sustainable globalisation will continue to change our economic, cultural, political and educational structures. It is not unthinkable that the states will gradually lose their present functions,

because education systems grow towards one another. Obviously, learning from one another already existed before the acceleration of globalisation. Expertise was concentrated in international organizations, such as UNESCO, the OECD, the World Bank and in international expert forums. The idea to develop international standards was strongly advocated by the OECD. European networks of experts for research and development are also open to a development process aiming at common quality indicators for school subjects. Organizations such as the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education (CIDREE) and The Standing International Conference of Central and General Inspectorates of Education (SICI) produce system reviews, comparisons and evaluations, by means of indicators and instruments. They also develop common visions on curriculum aspects, exchange practical examples and participate in collaborative projects. We observe that the ministries of different states increasingly adapt their education policies according to the results of international comparative research (see TIMMS, an international comparative study into learning results in mathematics and the exact sciences).

At the same time, however, regions promote and advance their own cultural identity and they demand political recognition and economic protection. The local prevails over the universal and the parties involved consider the preservation of the own language, morals and habits to be more essential than a common national culture. This will lead to communities within communities, which do not always welcome "strangers".

Of course, there are also teachers who would like their pupils to experience mutual dependency of "*there and here*" and point out the differences and similarities between "*far away and nearby*". (This is also called the educational principle of globalisation versus glocalisation).

The states will have to anticipate decentralized forces and in the long run they will not be able to put themselves forward as the keepers of a unified culture. The multi-ethnic society, consisting of a large variety of cultural minorities, will develop itself further and further. At the same time political and social groups will try to enforce a new nationalism, at the expense of a just and humane society. It is also a task and responsibility of education to create a pedagogically and ethically responsible climate in the institution of the school. In addition they should offer a physically and mentally safe environment, enabling students to fully develop their talents.

## Discussion

European self-awareness and a clear vision on shared ambitions and values in the field of education is an important step towards a common

policy. There are many important issues to discuss and to bring forward. A structured debate is a basic condition for understanding and cooperation. It is encouraging that the heads of state and ministers of education put so much emphasis on educational matters as they do. Willingness to cooperate is a premise for success, but not the only one. The collective ambition should be embedded in or be surrounded by a variety of provisions that guarantee real opportunities to still unexpected solutions.

In our view the contemporary approach that focuses on the extension of the knowledge economy and a better accessibility to education for larger groups has its benefits, but it is also a focus, with attendant risks, of much narrower views. The chosen triangle approach or interdependent relations between goal setting, the development of a knowledge society and economic growth is basically number and criterion driven and depends on a constant comparison of data originated in different contexts. This can easily lead to a biased result. The view on values or the "Weltanschauung" that speaks from the chosen approach might be more influential on a possible common education strategy. It can be questioned in what way the approach will lead to shallowness instead of a valuable influence by knowing and appreciating the richness of diversity. European member states vary in historical, ethical, psychological, ideological, cultural, economical and social perspective. The development of an education system is closely related to the development of nations and therefore has a specific structure and character. People in the member countries are shaped by their backgrounds, just as they contributed to the specific development or nature of their nation. Diversity is in that respect more an enrichment than a problem. Diversity is the challenge or motivation for discovery, for curiosity. In our opinion one of the corner stones of European education policy should be to cherish such diversity and to make it tangible and understandable. We refer in this respect to Elliot Eisner (1998), from Stanford University, when he talks about the kinds of schools we need. Eisner states that the mission of successful schools is decidedly not to bring everyone to the same place but, rather, to increase the variance in performance among students while escalating the mean for all. The reason is that the cultivation of cognitive diversity is an excellent way of creating a population better able to contribute uniquely to the common weal.

By saying this we do not mean to say that there are no common aspects in the curriculum. The development of education systems and their corresponding curricula in Europe has not been so autonomous that we could not discover common features.

Another cornerstone of the European debate should be an ongoing questioning of the innovative architecture of the education system. In this system expectations and demands of 21<sup>st</sup> century society should assume priority, instead of the constant repair of an insufficient relict from the past decade. In other words: if Europe really wishes to realise its ambitions, it has to do better than come up with old answers to new questions.

Thus, we should reconsider the traditional ways of year grouping in most of our schools, related to a curriculum that is focused at the non-existing average pupil.

We should also look at meaningful coherence in the curriculum, instead of persisting in the traditional and not very motivating atomic subject structure.

We also assert that the focus of European education policy should not be constantly in the competitive stance of how to score better than your neighbour country in an international survey on a specific area. We prefer to see education policy as a mutual endeavour in the context of a European education area, and not as an arena.

We think that education policy should focus on the challenge of how to improve the motivation of pupils in European schools, for instance by taking them more seriously than we apparently do and by giving them a more explicit role in curriculum decisions. At the core, pupils are responsible for their own development and if we assent to this statement then the pupils' role cannot be neglected.

European education policy that is focused more on equalization instead of dealing with diversity is not a productive paradigm, and is in that sense contradictory to the formulated ambitions of the leaders of state and government.

Besides the formulated ambitions of the European Commission, we should reconsider the conditions of change. Recently we noticed in Europe how difficult and expensive it was to convert to a single monetary unit. That relatively simple aspect of European unification suffered a lot of resistance, cost a tremendous amount of money and required a sophisticated organisation in all countries. And we are only talking about currency! Reshaping an educational system, and that is what we really want, if we take the formulated ambitions seriously, is quite another challenge. In the Netherlands we have experienced how difficult it is to introduce a new learning strategy in upper secondary education, called the "studiehuis" (study house). We strongly believe that the educational ideas and the underlying opinions about how pupils learn

are, in the "studiehuis" concept, valuable. The implementation however has not been a great success so far, which in our view is due to insufficient facilities and underestimation of the complexity of the concept.

When we look at the European strategy aimed at a common education policy - a much wider ambition than the example we gave before - we cannot ignore the fact that the strategy of soft open coordination is a vulnerable instrument. Change should be facilitated with proper budgets related to the breadth of the ambitions and supported by the commitment of the people involved. People however, as we have learned from Fullan, can also be the main obstacles in processes of change.

In our opinion the pursuit for excellent European education should not, or not only, be built on a foundation of undoubtedly well-intentioned indicators and benchmarks, developed and elaborated in settings far away from the place where education takes place, but in the readiness of a fundamental debate about toppling our traditional thinking about education. In the first CIDREE-yearbook (Letschert, 2001) we spoke about "Turning the perspective". This turning process starts with the basic question: What kind of people do we really like to be?, instead of: What economy do we want to create? If we want to persist with indicators, it would be better to find answers to questions such as: How meaningful is education for those for whom we develop it? Does it inspire teachers and pupils? Does it contribute to the competency of pupils to think creatively? And finally: Does it add value to our lives? That last question is in fact, or should be, the driving force in the European education process. An economic perspective is included in the answers, as are the perspectives of ethics, cultural heritage, social cohesion and the meaning of life.

The Lisbon ambition to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world should not be interpreted as a unilateral economically driven aim. We are not really interested in a debate about the aspects of a European curriculum. We rather want to focus on the European dimension in cooperative and meaningful educational development and curriculum exchange. This is an ongoing process that will not stop at some fixed future date. It is a process that follows the development of people, their thinking, the trends in society, the economic perspectives of nations, but most of all the beliefs of people. In this process you need constantly to find new balances in curriculum questions on issues like:

- generic versus context specific knowledge
- breadth versus depth in curricular coverage

- excellence versus equity in outcomes
- basic versus higher order learning outcomes.

The challenge for the member states of the European Union is to be constantly open to new perspectives, to cherish a sincere appreciation of and esteem for the unique aspects of their own communities, and to persist in a readiness for cooperation. Of course, you also need a reliable and qualitative infrastructure to support your ambition. In this light it is at least remarkable, from our Dutch perspective, that representation of the national curriculum institute SLO is not evident in any of the European committees.

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