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The Dutch education system: structures, policies and controversies

Hülya Kosar Altinyelken, Sjoerd Karsten

Introduction

The Dutch education system is renowned for its high quality and some of its unique characteristics. One of its key features is freedom of education, namely freedom to establish schools, determine the principles on which the school is based, and organise classroom teaching. It has one of the oldest national systems based on school choice in the world. Almost all schools are government funded at primary and secondary school levels, yet the majority of these schools are administered by private school boards. Furthermore, it demonstrates a strong central education policy role but decentralised school management. These features make the Dutch education system an interesting and unique case to study.

This chapter seeks to analyse the general organisation and structure of the Dutch education system by highlighting the historical, cultural and political developments in which the current structure is rooted in. In this respect, the chapter will review the main characteristics of the system, including constitutional freedom to establish schools, school autonomy, school choice, independent schools and equal footing of public and private schools in terms of financing. Furthermore, the chapter will discuss some of the major contemporary issues and problems that face the Dutch education system by referring to early selection, school segregation, and education of immigrants. While doing so, a number of large-scale reforms, which the Dutch education system has witnessed in the past two decades, encompassing content and organisation of education as well as conditions of employment, personnel management and funding, will be outlined. These reforms have been influenced by neo-liberal policies, characterised by deregulation and decentralisation in the delivery of education, and stronger control of the outcomes of education (Karsten, 1999). Finally, the chapter will consider European and international trends that influence educational issues in the Netherlands by analysing the impact of EU 2020 and PISA on policy discourses and the Bologna process.

Structure of the Dutch education system: a historical overview

The Dutch education system developed from what was almost a complete state monopoly with secular traits at the beginning of the 19th century into a predominantly privatised system with a strong religious character at the start of the 20th century (Karsten & Teelken, 1996). The first piece of educational legislation, the Primary Education Act, was passed in 1801. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primary schools were divided into public schools funded by the government and private schools, which were financed from private sources. A 40-year political battle was fought to achieve complete equality under the law for both types of school. Catholics and Protestants wanted their own schools with a pronounced Roman Catholic or Protestant identity but with equal state funding. The Liberals too wanted the freedom of education guaranteed by the Constitution to be reflected in equal financial treatment of public and private schools. This was finally achieved in the 1917 Constitution, in what is known as the

"Pacification of 1917". After 1917, the principle of financial equality was extended to secondary and higher education (Eurydice, 2009).

The 1917 constitutional compromise has had three important consequences for the education system and education policy in The Netherlands: privatisation, centralisation and corporatism. In the following period, the original relationship between public and private education was radically reversed. Private education, now fully funded by the state, conquered a market share of around 70%, which rose to 73% in the decades following the First World War. After the 1970s, despite the fact that a majority of the Dutch population stated not to belong (anymore) to a religious denomination, private education's market share has remained almost constant. A second consequence was the high level of financial centralisation and the detailed quality of the legislation. This can be seen quite clearly in the legislation concerning the funding of schools. If equality was to be realised then rules should prescribe to what percentage refunding was possible. However, this centralisation was also linked to the fact that Dutch confessional parties did not want to grant the local governments a policy-making role in the area of education. Furthermore, the third consequence of the compromise was its strong tendency towards corporatism. The most salient instance of this emerges in networking and political lobbying networks. The Netherlands has an extensive network of corporative structures such as consultative bodies, innovation teams, process managers and advisory committees. Particularly in areas such as services planning, educational reform and employment legislation, the government and education organizations are strongly interlinked. The government still takes the initiative in these matters, but at the same time places the responsibility for policy-making, and certainly for its execution, in the hands of the interest groups (Karsten, 1999).

The freedom of education

One of the key features of the Dutch education system, guaranteed under article 23 of the Constitution, is the freedom of education, i.e. the freedom to found schools (freedom of establishment), to organise the teaching in schools (freedom of organisation of teaching) and to determine the principles on which they are based (freedom of conviction). Dutch citizens have the right to found schools and to provide teaching based on their religious, ideological or educational beliefs. As a result, there are both publicly run and privately run schools in the Netherlands. Publicly run schools are open to all children regardless of religion or outlook, generally subject to public law, governed by the municipal council (or a governing committee) or by a public legal entity or foundation set up by the council, and provide education on behalf of the state.

Privately run schools, on the other hand, can refuse to admit pupils whose parents do not subscribe to the belief or ideology on which the school's teaching is based. These schools are subject to private law and are state-funded although not set up by the state, governed by the board of the association or foundation that set them up. Privately run schools base their teaching on religious or ideological beliefs, including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Steiner-Waldorf schools. Some schools base their teaching on specific educational ideas, such as the Montessori, Dalton, Freinet or Jena Plan method. They may be either publicly or privately run. The freedom to organise teaching means that schools are free to determine how the curriculum is organised. However, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science sets quality

standards which apply to both public and private education. These quality standards prescribe the subjects to be studied, the attainment targets or examination syllabuses and the content of national examinations, the number of teaching periods per year, the qualifications which teachers are required to have, giving parents and pupils a say in school matters, planning and reporting obligations, and so on. As explained above, The Constitution places public and private schools on an equal financial footing (Eurydice, 2009). It is also important to note that both primary and secondary schools which receive public funds must be non-for-profit schools.

Private non-religious schools

In The Netherlands a wide range of innovative schools can be found in the private non-religious sector. On the one hand schools originated from traditional reformist educators such as Dalton, Montessori, Jenaplan, Freinet, Steiner, and Sudbury Valley type schools (Iederwijs, Sociocratic schools and Werkplaats Kindergemeenschap). On the other hand, modern pedagogical entrepreneurs founded schools, for instance bilingual schools which are internationally orientated school tracks culminating in an International Baccalaureate certificate, European schools, and schools dedicated to ICT, cultural or intellectual gifted pupils.

The common feature of these private non-religious schools is the strong believe in the freedom of education and school choice, a pillar of the unique Dutch educational system. Teachers often feel in charge of the curriculum and more engaged in the school of their choice, which is considered very positive. At the same time, publicly funded, private schools are frequently forced into the defensive by Dutch politicians and policymakers who cannot or do not want to see this historical treasure within Dutch education. However, in comparison, independent schools in other European countries are in far less ideal circumstances.

The national organisation for these schools is the Vereniging Bijzondere Scholen (VBS). VBS contributes to the public educational debate, embedding these schools more firmly into society, and thus keeping freedom of education alive and future-proof. To educate is, above all, to give meaning, and these schools do so from their various religious, ideological or pedagogical values. By applying corporate social responsibility as co-operatives, schools can remain true to their own ideological profiles (Steen, 2012). According to VBS, education as a system should not be micro-managed and controlled by the government, as this only leads to more uniformity and standardisation. In these times of globalisation, what young people actually need is a broad personal background (compare *Bildung*) and space for diversity, creativity and entrepreneurship. Schools and parents are natural partners in this *Bildung* process. They play a significant role in the school's function as a community of values. A diversity of school size and features should be encouraged. Thus, for example, the Dutch government allowance for smaller schools (*kleinescholentoelag*) is indispensable according to this organization. Without this allowance, multiformity among schools will inevitably suffer, limiting choices for parents, pupils and teachers. According to VBS, the *kleinescholentoelag* is essential to build day-care centres, libraries, sports associations and more, all under the banner of the Dutch 'broad school'.

The organization of schooling and transitions

The Dutch education system has limited educational facilities for children under the age of four. Pre-school and early childhood education focuses on children aged two to five who are in risk of developing an educational disadvantage. Most Dutch children enter primary school in the year they turn four years of age, although the mandatory school age is five. Primary education lasts eight years. For pupils who require specialized care and support, there is special (primary) education (SE) and secondary special education. On average, children are 12 years of age when they enter secondary education. This sector offers several options: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), general secondary education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO). Pupils can also transfer to practical training (PT) or secondary special education (SSE). After primary education, the majority of pupils still transfer to VMBO. VMBO comprises four programmes: a basic vocational programme (BL), a middle management programme (KL), a combined programme (GL) and a theoretical programme (TL). After VMBO, at an average age of 16, pupils may transfer to secondary vocational education (MBO). Those who have completed the theoretical programme can also choose to transfer to HAVO (see the figure 1 below for school types and transition possibilities). HAVO is intended as preparation for higher professional education (HBO). On the other hand, VWO is intended to prepare pupils for universities (WO).

The school types differ in terms of the duration of their programmes: VMBO takes four years, HAVO five years and VWO six years. MBO comprises a vocational training programme and a block or day release programme. There are four qualification levels: assistant worker (level 1), basic vocational training (level 2), professional training (level 3) and middle-management training (level 4). The programmes last a maximum of four years. The 4-year HBO programmes lead to the award of a bachelor's degree. In universities, a bachelor's degree can be earned in three years. A master's degree programme takes either one or two years (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2009).

The obligation to attend school is laid down in the Compulsory Education Act 1969. Every child must attend school full time from the first school day of the month following its fifth birthday for 12 full school years and, in any event, until the end of the school year in which they turn 16. Young people are then required to attend an institution providing courses for this purpose for two days a week for another year (Eurydice, 2007). Since August 2007, the obligation to continue education in order to obtain a basic qualification is applicable to youngsters under the age of 18, who have finished compulsory education but have not yet obtained a basic qualification certificate. They have to achieve at least a certificate at HAVO, VWO or MBO 2 level (SLO, 2008).

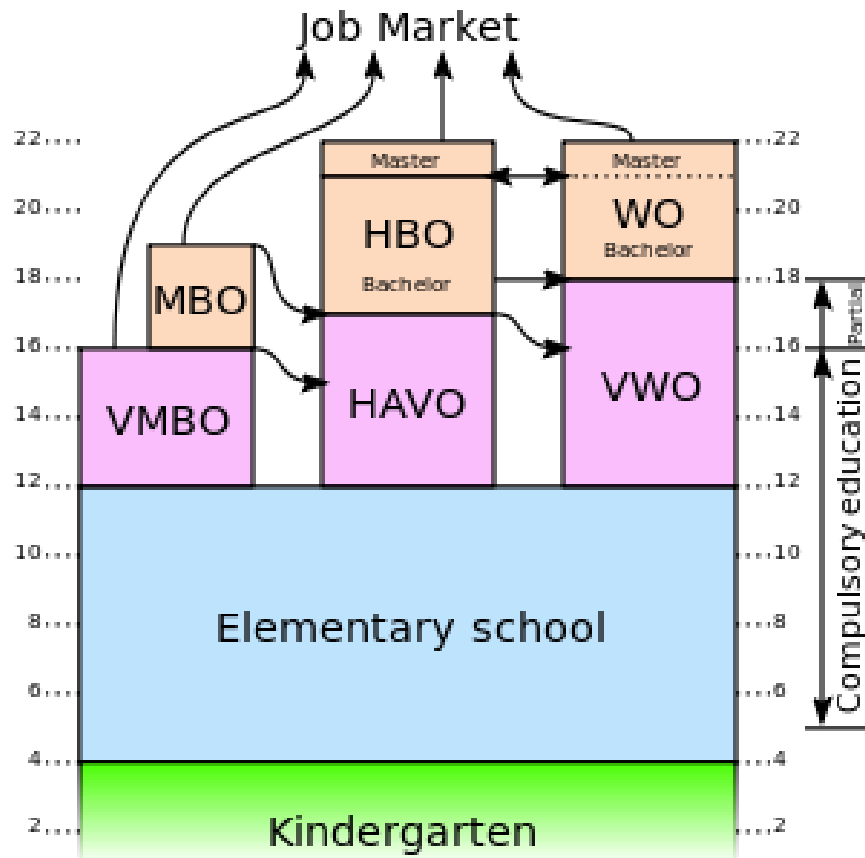


Figure: The structure of the Dutch education system

At secondary level, schools vary in the degree of selectivity, with VMBO being the least selective and the VWO being the most selective. The most important decision has to be made at the age of 12 when children complete primary education. Therefore the transition from primary to secondary education appears to be a defining moment for young people's educational career (Stevens et al., 2011), as well as their job prospects. Pupils are transferred to the different types of secondary schools based on the scores on standardised tests at the end of primary school (mainly CITO) and the advice of their teacher. Test results are much influential in transition to secondary, as the scores largely determine to which type of secondary school a pupil can be admitted. However, teacher advice is also consulted, particularly in cases when the scores are not considered sufficient to base a decision. Although some schools do offer so-called 'bridge years' that may somewhat correct the early tracking, enrolment into a certain type of secondary school still practically determines the whole educational career of an individual – leading them towards or away from access to higher education. Ethnic minorities are often at a disadvantage in these highly stratified school systems. Being channelled into low or dead-end tracks early on makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for them to reach access to higher education later on (Pasztor, 2010). Transition from VMBO to MBO is particularly problematic, as many failed to make such transition and dropout of the education system (Elffers, 2012). Besides, pupils who

study at VMBO often feel stuck in this low track, as there is limited space and opportunity for them to enter upper levels of HAVO.

Governance of the Dutch education system

In recent decades, there has been a growing trend in the Dutch education system towards greater autonomy and decentralisation, as many central government tasks have been transferred to the level of the individual school or local authority (municipality). Consequently, the central government has increasingly focused on defining the general outline of education policy, leaving the interpretation and implementation of this general policy outline to those directly involved namely the school boards and the schools.

The expansion of school autonomy pertains to both the schools and the teachers. The Netherlands has indeed a long social and political tradition of restraint by the central government in relation to the provision of education. The reasons for granting greater autonomy to educational institutions differ from era to era. In the 19th century and the early 20th century, educational institutions were given greater autonomy primarily based on religious, political and philosophical considerations. In the 1980s, the pursuit of democratic participation played a greater role. A more efficient management of public funds was the most important motive for increasing autonomy at the end of the 1990s. In the past decade, improving education quality has been an important rationale for increasing school autonomy (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2009).

The overall responsibility of the system lies with the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. There is one (independent) advisory body at national level - the Education Council - that advises the government on the main outline of policy and legislation. At school level, school boards and the school administrations are the competent authorities. They are responsible for implementing legislation and regulations. Central government control is increasingly confined to the area of broad policy-making and to creating the right conditions for the provision of good quality education. Institutions are being given greater freedom in the way they allocate their resources and manage their own affairs. However, they are still answerable to government for their performance and policies. The increase in autonomy places a heavier responsibility on school managers and boards, and entails an increased need for good governance.

Furthermore, school boards have a large degree of autonomy in the teaching methods they choose and the textbooks they use. Although in the majority of EU countries, the schools and teachers may not determine the contents of the curriculum, in the Netherlands (within the boundaries of the attainment targets) teachers can determine independently or together what the contents of the syllabus of required subjects will be (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2009). However, the examinations at the end of primary schools (mainly CITO) and national secondary leaving exams determines to a large extent the content of the curriculum, as schools strive to improve the achievement levels of their pupils in such exams. In that sense, the autonomy of schools in deciding the contents of the curriculum is framed at a central level by the Ministry. The safeguarding of the quality of education is carried out by the National Education Inspectorate. As a result of policies that give greater autonomy to schools and other educational institutions, the task of the Inspectorate of Education has shifted towards supervising the quality of the system, e.g. guaranteeing the basic quality of the schools, and the quality of the accountability efforts provided by the schools (Inspectorate of Education, 2007).

Major reform efforts

In the past two decades, a series of large scale, system-wide reforms were introduced in the Dutch education system. Similar to many other countries around the world, these reforms were highly influenced by globalisation, knowledge economies discourse and neo-liberal policies (Karsten, 1999). Reforms were introduced in major policy areas from the content of curriculum to the organisation of the education system, from employment conditions to personal management and funding. Reforms can be broadly categorised into two groups: The first line of reforms aimed at addressing intrinsic educational issues, such as sustaining a smooth transition from one type or level of education to a subsequent one, improving co-operation between mainstream primary schools and special schools, reducing group sizes in primary education, stimulating the use of ICT, and introducing a new financing system for pupils who are in need of special care. The second line of reforms was related to issues such as financing, personnel management and conditions of service, and included a large component of deregulation and devolution of responsibilities.

The overall trend in recent reforms can be characterised as an on-going process aimed at devolving responsibilities and problem solving capacities to a lower level, from central government to the organisations of employers and employees, to local authorities and to school boards. While central government retained its responsibility for providing direction within the education system (what public tasks must be fulfilled, the conditions for doing so, the funds), schools were given greater financial, managerial and educational freedom. Some of the major reform initiatives included harmonising and broadening early childhood education, increasing autonomy, deregulation and decentralisation in primary education, introducing block grant funding to schools, changes in weighting system, merging individual schools (for efficiency reasons) into big organisations that can be run by specialised managerial staff, and initiatives aimed at reducing drop-out (Meesters, 2003). In addition, extended schools were introduced in order to bridge the gap between crèche, preschool and primary school and to provide after-school care for all children. This reform allows for more out-of-school activities and for parents (mothers) the opportunity to work. While the extended school is almost universal for the primary sector, it is still expanding in secondary education (du Bois-Reymond, 2009).

When reforms were evaluated in retrospect, they were considered too many by politicians, teachers and the general public. Hence, there are concerns that the education system was overloaded and burdened by too many change demands. The reform implementation process was also criticized in some other ways: there were arguments that the reforms were implemented without thorough preparation of the field and were withdrawn hastily when detrimental consequences became visible. Often no reliable evaluations of the long-term consequences were made or could be made. For instance, the new didactic approaches, which advocated more autonomous and self-administered forms of student learning, were introduced without adequate preparation of the teachers. Moreover, the reforms were criticised for not only failing to achieve their objectives but also inadvertently creating new problems.

Contemporary issues and debates

Education remains a highly contested and debated area among the Dutch public, as it closely relates to some other important societal issues such as employment, economic development, competitiveness of Dutch economy, welfare, and integration. Different actors have made diverse diagnosis of weaknesses and failings of the education system, often reflecting their own interest areas, values, and positions within the system. One of the recurrent themes of the debate on education has been a concern that education reforms of the past decade have failed to achieve their purposes while inadvertently creating new problems. For instance, decentralisation has been installed in several areas within education sector and the government establishes the central criteria. However, as it has fewer ways of exerting influence on schools than it previously had, this raises the question of whether the government still has enough significance in these educational areas. Besides, mergers of schools and governance of a few schools under the same board seem to have threatened the freedom of choice, a hallmark of Dutch education system (Education Council, 2009). Moreover, there are concerns that as a result of recent education reforms, education has become a 'business'; that too many responsibilities and tasks were allocated to schools and teachers, overwhelming their capacity; and overhead costs of schools have increased substantially as they have increasingly employed more staff to manage and administer the schools which have become quite large. In contrast to the expectations, mergers among schools have not also increased the economies of scale and did not improve the efficiency of the system (Verbrugge, 2009).

In the following section, some major issues that are recurrently discussed among educationalists and general public will be elaborated. These include, early selection, education of migrants, and segregation.

Early selection

The Dutch education system is characterised by an early selection system and a highly stratified system at secondary level. In this respect, it contrasts with countries such as the US and the UK where the selection takes place at a rather later stage, at entrance to higher education institutions. In the Netherlands, however, studying at higher education is more constrained by the previous school type attended than the selective admission of higher education institutions or large tuition fees.

Early selection implies that pupils in the Netherlands are selected into highly differentiated educational trajectories at an early age (around 12) based upon their perceived aptitude (standardised tests and teacher's advice). In the past, various attempts to introduce more comprehensive types of schooling have failed (e.g. comprehensive schools). Anti-early selection discourses emphasize the inequalities, which the Dutch education system creates and/or reinforces by its early selection policy. This discourse points to the moment of selection as one of the most problematic issues, and therefore, put much discursive priority on systematic changes (to delay selection moment for a few more school years) or modifications that would remedy the adverse effects of early selection for the disadvantaged pupils. Early selection is considered to have a negative effect on equity. Because, early selection limits participation of pupils from lower educational tracks to continue study at higher tracks of secondary education and higher education institutions. Yet, unlike those who argue that early selection contributes to better

quality, the proponents of this discourse are not convinced that there is such a strong positive effect on quality. Furthermore, early selection prematurely forces young people to make choices that would influence their future life. They are selected at a very early stage in their life into academic or vocational tracks. At vocational schools young people are required to even make occupational choices at a very young age (Altinyelken and Du-Bois-Reymond, 2012).

On the other hand, the pro-early selection discourse prioritizes quality issues rather than equality issues. Organisations or individuals who support early selection argue that the research studies indicating a negative effect on equality are inconclusive. Furthermore, the current Minister of Education, Culture and Science suggest that quality is a more pressing issue for the Dutch education system at the moment. Preserving differentiation and tracking soon after primary education is therefore essential. The general pro-quality argument is that when talented pupils are mixed with much less talented pupils, their educational performance will decrease, as they are not stimulated by their peers. They might also lack teacher attention because teaching in a heterogeneous class is more demanding. This discourse does not ignore equality problems. However, it offers only marginal changes within the system to compensate for those pupils who might be at a disadvantage because of early selection e.g., non-Western immigrants or other pupils from low socio-economic background. The Education Council (2010) suggests a variety of measures in this direction, such as mixed bridging classes after primary education.

Education of immigrants

Education and integration of immigrants is a recurrent theme within political discussions since the 1980s. The position of immigrant children within education system continues to be a great concern for educators because of their relatively low educational performance, poor participation in higher tracks of secondary education and in higher education institutions, and relatively high repetition and dropout rates (Karsten, 2010). Furthermore, high levels of educational segregation closely relate to this topic, and generate a lot of heated discussions within the country.

There are broadly two positions relating to education of migrants: the dominant official policy entails that there is no need to devise specific policy measures targeting migrants. Consequently, a shift has been observed in recent years from specifically migrant target group oriented policy towards general disadvantage policy in socio-economic terms, which is considered to be more in line with the actual disadvantage suffered by immigrant pupils. Hence cultural-ethnic background became a less important criterion in national policies that aim at removing financial obstacles and guaranteeing accessibility of education for all children. These national policies include amongst others free access to education up to the age of 18, grants for low income families to cover study costs, study finance from the age of 18 to cover tuition fees and other costs. At primary education level, the target group for disadvantage policy is now based exclusively on the education level of parents, and no longer on immigrant background. Accordingly, since 2006, school funding is largely determined by the parents' level of education rather than by their ethnicity and type of employment. There are two pupil weightings: 1) a weighting of 0.3 if both parents' highest level of education is junior secondary vocational education; 2) a weighting of 1.2 if one parent's highest level of education is primary education and the other parent's is junior secondary vocational education; and a weighting of 0 for other pupils. Furthermore, in secondary education, the criterion of country of origin was removed.

Schools receive compensatory funding based on the number of pupils who live in deprived areas. A direct consequence of this policy shift was that funds were directed away from schools with large numbers of migrants to schools with native Dutch disadvantaged pupils (SCP, 2009).

However, some other policy actors, such as civil society organisations, knowledge centres and academics, highlight that the challenges for migrant pupils differ in terms of their nature and scope; hence, improving education of migrants requires specific policy measures. They believe that the present shift of the government from migrants to ‘disadvantage’ in general might run the risk of further deterioration of educational achievement among migrant pupils. This discourse emphasizes on-going structural issues and the need for specific policies targeting migrant children. Structural issues include persistent lower academic achievement among migrant children, low language proficiency in Dutch (and even in their native language) and underrepresentation in the two highest tracks of secondary education and higher education. Furthermore school segregation having a negative impact on social cohesion, and more frequent advice of migrant children to lowest tracks because of their deficiency in language skills rather than lower intellectual capacity are also structural issues in the discourse. Hence, the supporters of this discourse suggest that tackling these concerns require specific measures, such as additional language support at schools and improving parent-school cooperation (VO Raad, 2011), improving the quality of teachers teaching at segregated schools, and increasing involvement of migrant parents in the school decision-making process (Smit et al., 2007).

School segregation

The influx of migrants after the 1960s has left clear marks on the education system. In the first place the unbalanced distribution of ethnic minorities throughout the country at large, and within large cities in particular, led to the first symptoms of segregation in the late 1980s, which the various authorities did little to avert. Since then the segregation of pupils into so-called ‘White’ and ‘Black’ schools has not only increased in number but also in complexity. The aspirations of the Islamic and Hindu communities to set up their ‘own’ schools has also gained momentum. Dutch education was segregated along denominational lines for a long time as children attended the school that matched their parents’ religious or other beliefs. As a consequence of this religious segregation, for a long time, too little attention was paid to segregation by socioeconomic status and more recently by ethnic background. Because of variations in the socioeconomic composition of different districts and the strategic location of the private nondenominational schools (the traditional elite schools), major differences in the composition of pupil populations persisted throughout the 20th century despite equal state funding. Only when this socioeconomic segregation acquired a colour in the 1980s and 1990s did the segregation become an issue in political debate (Karsten, 1999).

At present, there are more Dutch primary schools having a high concentration of ethnic minority pupils than schools with a high concentration of white children from low-income parents. Most of the latter group of schools is found in rural areas in the North of the country (with declining industries), whereas the schools with high concentrations of ethnic minority pupils are mainly in the cities. In the period from 1985 to 2000, the percentage of primary schools with more than 70% of pupils from non-Western families with a low level of education rose from 15% to 35% in the four largest cities. Such high levels of segregation is largely caused

by a combination of residential segregation as well as free school choice policy, which is a long standing tradition in the Netherlands (Karsten et al., 2006).

The current debate on the topic is primarily concerned with two possible negative effects of segregation on educational achievement and social integration of different groups into Dutch society (e.g. an increase in stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination based on ethnicity (Karsten et al., 2006). The outcomes of the studies on educational achievement appear to be not conclusive. However, several studies point to a lowering of standards and negative peer effects on cognitive achievement in schools where migrant pupils are concentrated (see Karsten et al., 2006 for a review of these studies). Some recent research, however, argues that the ethnically homogenous schools perform better than schools that have a diverse student population (Dronkers, 2010).

The current government does not perceive segregation as a problem and it does not plan to invest in measures to combat segregation. The alternative discourse emphasizes that segregation is a serious problem indeed, affecting not only the education sector and the educational opportunities of migrant pupils, but social well-being and social cohesion in general (Altinyelken & Du Bois-Reymond, 2012).

European and international trends that influence educational issues in the Netherlands

The new Europe 2020 strategy has influenced education policy making in the Netherlands. The European benchmarks for 2020 were translated into national objectives in a memorandum, entitled 'Towards a Robust Knowledge Economy'. Five specific benchmarks are concerned in the field of education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012):

1. *Early school leaving*: School dropout is defined as leaving the educational system without a so-called 'start qualification', which is equal to a diploma of upper secondary education (HAVO, VWO or level 2 of MBO). Dutch education and labour-market policy regard this start qualification as the minimum level needed to enter the labour market properly equipped (van der Steeg, 2006). Awarding a basic qualification to all is one of the main priorities of the Dutch education system. In 2010/11, the number of early school-leavers totalled 38,568, and senior vocational education (MBO) accounts for 75 per cent of new dropouts (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012). By the year 2020, school dropout rates in the EU must be reduced to below 10 per cent. The Netherlands has a stricter national target of 8 per cent for 2020 and has made significant progress in recent years. In 2010, the school dropout rate in the Netherlands was already 10.1 per cent, realising the EU 2020 target.
2. *Lifelong learning*: According to the above benchmark, at least 15 per cent of the adult population in Europe (ages 25-64) must be enrolled in a study programme or training course. Again, the Netherlands has set a stricter national target of 20 per cent for 2020. In the year 2010, the Netherlands achieved a score of 16.5 per cent. This places it among the top performing countries in Europe.

3. *Basic skills:* The ambition formulated in EU2020 was to reduce the share of 15-year-olds with scant reading, mathematics and science skills. By the year 2020, this share must be reduced to less than 15 per cent in all three fields across Europe. The Dutch objective for 2020 is stricter: 8 per cent. Within Europe, the Netherlands ranks among the top 5, which is an excellent score.
4. *Share of tertiary education graduates:* The target for 2020 is to have at least 40 per cent of 30 to 34-year-olds in Europe complete a study programme at the tertiary education level. In 2010, the Netherlands already attained a score of 41.4 per cent.
5. *Early-school programmes.* According to this target, at the European level, at least 95 per cent of children from the age of four to school entry age must participate in early-school programmes by 2020. In the Netherlands, this target group includes pupils in primary years 1 and 2, which currently already accommodate nearly 100 per cent of four-year old children.

Over the last decade, Dutch government and educationalists in general are perceived as more open-minded to understand educational developments abroad (e.g. Finland) to improve the Dutch education system. The process of internationalization influencing educational issues in the Netherlands is encouraged by various professional organizations such as the *European Platform Internationalising Education* supporting schools in internationalizing the classroom. Schools can participate in several networks and projects concerning language acquisition and international orientations. In addition, grants are available for such projects as pupil and staff mobility and in-service teacher training. The European Platform is part of the Dutch National Agency for the Lifelong Learning Program (LLP) and coordinates Comenius for schools, Grundtvig for adult education and Study Visits for educational policy-makers. LLP promotes co-operation between educational institutions within the EU and a number of associated countries. Other professional organizations that support the internationalization of Dutch higher education are amongst others *Nuffic* (The Netherlands Organisation for International Cooperation in Higher Education), and *Nether* (the Netherlands House for Education and Research); a network of Dutch educational and research institutions and a platform for debate on the impact of Europe in Dutch education.

An increasing number of Dutch primary schools participate in international projects, with early (English) language learning, and e-Twinning building alliances with schools abroad. Moreover, in Dutch secondary schools an increasing amount of pupils is internationally mobile. Schools that choose a truly international profile are given support in setting up internationalized curricula, TTO (Tweetalig Onderwijs, bilingual education) and ELOS (Grensverleggend Onderwijs, Education Stretching Borders). ELOS started in 2004 with today 180 schools across Europe including 39 schools in The Netherlands (see www.europeesplatform.nl).

The Bologna Process has been one of the major catalysts in the Dutch higher education reform. The Bologna Process is based on European ministerial agreements to ensure comparability in standards and quality of higher education. The Bologna Process has provided a framework for common efforts to reform and harmonize higher education across Europe, by improving quality, stimulate mobility, and increased access and diversity of students to higher education. Thus, for example, all Dutch higher education institutions implemented the European

Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS). One academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS-credits that are equivalent to 1500–1800 hours of study in all countries irrespective of standard or qualification type and is used to facilitate transfer and progression throughout the Union. Mobility of Dutch students and staff members has increased over the last few decades (Alexiadou & van de Bunt-Kokhuis, 2013). Dutch institutes for higher education take an active part in Erasmus Mundus, Leonardo da Vinci, Cultural Agreement programs, Beursopener, China, MENA scholarship, etc. The Dutch society is very internationally oriented, and this causes the active participation in these international programs. The

The Bologna Process has transformed the face of Dutch higher education, as illustrated by some Nuffic figures. The number of foreign students in public funded Dutch higher education increased from 38,726 in academic year 2007-2008 to 56,131 in 2001-2012; and the number of Dutch students studying for a diploma abroad increased from 13,184 in academic year 2004-2005 to 18,115 in 2008-2009 (NUFFIC, 2012).

Furthermore, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) continues to influence educational debates and policies in the Netherlands. The last PISA study, published in December 2010, reveals that the Dutch 15-year-olds perform above average in international terms with regard to reading, mathematics and natural sciences (the second in the European rankings in reading and mathematics skills and third in natural sciences skills). However, a significant decrease in mathematics skills compared to 2006 and 2003, for instance, raised various concerns and discussions with regard to the quality of education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012).

Conclusion

Education remains a highly contested and debated area in the Netherlands, as the societal expectations of the system continues to increase. Education is viewed as closely linked to some other important social and political issues such as employment, economic development, competitiveness of the Dutch economy, welfare, and immigrant integration. Different actors have made diverse diagnosis of weaknesses and failings of the education system, often reflecting their own interest areas, values, and positions within the system. One of the recurrent themes of the debate on education has been a concern that education reforms of the past decade have failed to achieve their purposes while inadvertently creating new problems (Altinyelken et al., 2010). The ongoing concerns about education system include students who leave schooling early without an adequate qualification to enter the labour market; increasing numbers of young people with behavioural problems; aggression at school (especially at secondary level); a large number of pupils with reading difficulties; limited ambition among the youth for lifelong learning; and rapidly ageing teaching staff and severe teacher shortages (Inspectorate of Education, 2007). In addition, improving education quality, tackling too big school organisations, reducing bureaucracy, eliminating ethnic segregation, controversies surrounding formal and non-formal religious education, and improving educational achievement of non-Western non-Dutch students are viewed as pressing policy concerns and challenges for the future of the Dutch education system.

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