

BUILDING THE TOOLBOX: NETHERLANDS
The Context for Schools and Reform in the Netherlands:
Government Policy and Drivers of Change

The following report provides the information note for Netherlands for the Forum session on "Building an Operational Toolbox for Innovation, Forward-thinking and School System Change". It describes the two reform strategies that are the focus of Netherlands Schooling for Tomorrow "toolbox" activity - 'Initiative-rich' Schools and the Educational Opportunity Policy.

Introduction

Dutch education is characterised by a system in which both public and private education facilities enjoy equal governmental funding while being subject to the same national regulation. National administration and regulation emphasise uniformity and the equal rights of schools, teachers and pupils. The Dutch Department of Education originates policy formulation and implementation. System-wide regulation and an important role for intermediary organisations are key characteristics of the Dutch education system. Recently, decentralised decision-making, stronger autonomy and accountability have come to be increasingly emphasised.

Two developments are acting as important drivers towards reform aiming at greater autonomy: teacher shortages and the imperative of combating educational disadvantages. The thinking behind giving more autonomy to schools in primary and secondary education is that they know best their own context, their major problems, and the assets enjoyed by the school and its environment. By empowering schools we expect to make a bigger impact in addressing these driving problems than through uniform regulations that aim to solve them for all schools.

The 'Laboratories of Change' Initiatives - 'Initiative-rich' Schools and Educational Opportunity Policy

Both of the recent reforms that constitute our "laboratories of change" toolbox initiatives - 'Initiative-rich' Schools and the Educational Opportunity Policy - can be understood as consistent with the OECD's Scenario 2b, i.e. Schools as Focused Learning Organisations. They are based on school-led and school-focused experimentation and innovation, and emphasise the responsibility of schools for educational choices and corresponding personnel policies and financial management. Such responsibility is expected to foster professional expertise and satisfaction, effective partnerships with others in their wider environment (parents, local communities, civil society), and especially enhanced educational quality.

The link between these reforms and instruments in the OECD toolbox is not only that the scenarios are helpful for policymakers and schools to help clarify their picture of the desired future but also that these initiatives are ways of taking the steps towards that future. We have, for instance, the concrete example of an individual school that has used forward thinking in participating in the 'initiative-rich schools' project.

'Initiative-rich schools'/ Initiatiefrijke scholen

Most schools consider the Department of Education to be something of an overly prescriptive nuisance. In November 2000, Parliament initiated the 'Initiatiefrijke scholen' project by asking the Minister of Education to launch 'regulation-free' or 'regulation-low' schools on an experimental basis, and this began on February 2001. The names underline the project's main philosophy: inviting schools to consider all manner of initiatives that might improve the quality of education, without restricting their imagination and innovation by being too bothered about national regulations.

In line with this philosophy, the project's conceptual framework, especially as regards the new relationships between schools and the DoE, is one of 'interactive governance'. The project started by asking 33 school organisations at both primary and secondary levels to explore what affects schools attempting to raise the quality of education. No topics were off the agenda in the dialogue between government officials and school organisations and many issues were raised, ranging from regulations, examinations, and curriculum issues to funding principles, personnel issues, etc. The working method of

the project enabled direct interaction between civil servants and professionals, through school visits and thematic meetings.

National results

On the basis of this exploratory phase, propositions for improved national policies were drawn up and 10 concrete projects prepared. The innovation projects can be divided in three categories:

1. 'Explorers': exploration by a small number of schools of new, as yet untried strategies to improve the quality and relevance of education. The ideas they develop are radically different from mainstream educational practice. It may well be that relatively few schools would follow these directions in the future.
2. 'Scouts': in given areas of educational innovation, the next step is taken. If the path has successfully been explored, many more schools may follow. It may well be that many schools would follow these directions in the future.
3. 'Early implementers': areas that will undoubtedly affect the whole system at a given point in time are taken up early by a group of schools. It is anticipated that all schools will take this direction in the future.

Through the process of open dialogue and project formulation, a sense of increasing trust and joint responsibility has developed. In the past, the gap between policy formulation and its implementation by schools was huge; today, policy formulation increasingly adopts a school-centred perspective. Schools come to the professional challenges they face and need to tackle with a fresh view and less hemmed in by DoE rules and regulations. In short, a process of empowerment of professionals is emerging.

What roles for schools and the DoE?

The Project has raised the question of the role schools and the professionals that work in them (school leaders, teachers) can play in national education policy formulation. Four main roles can be distinguished, which give increasingly more importance, from the first to the fourth, to schools as actors in the formulation of educational policies [in what might be described as a 'ladder of participation']:

- ❑ Schools as clients/target groups;
- ❑ Schools as stakeholders that produce ideas;
- ❑ Schools as co-authors of the policy agenda;
- ❑ Schools as co-producers of education policy.

The Project is raising critical and sometimes uneasy questions about the role of the DoE, such as:

- ❑ Does the DoE have the monopoly on decisions over issues such as curriculum and quality education?
- ❑ To what extent can the government plan educational innovation?
- ❑ Do system-wide educational policies do justice to the need for local experimentation and innovation at the school level?

In particular, the Project has started a process of reflection about the effectiveness of innovation policies. Two modes of innovation can be distinguished:

Mode A based on:

Mode B based on:

Adoption; Design, Development, Diffusion ; Adaptation, Mutual Learning, Schools, Local Experts; System-wide; Uniformity; Top-down Variety, Bottom-up

The 'Initiatiefrijke scholen' Project clearly is seeking to induce 'Mode B' innovation in a system that traditionally is more familiar with 'Mode A'. For the Dutch government, the learning processes and policy tools involved in making this shifting from A to B - including the consequences for 'innovative' and 'non-innovative' schools - help explain its involvement with the Schooling for Tomorrow project.

Educational Opportunity Policy

For several decades the Netherlands has implemented policies aimed explicitly to address the needs of children with educational disadvantages. Traditionally, these were geared towards disadvantaged Dutch pupils. However, due to large increases in migrant groups from the 1960s, they have become the main focal point of such policies in recent years.

Although the aims and substance generally have remained unchanged throughout this period, political pressure and various concomitant social views have held back decisive measures. The first national policy framework (in Dutch: *Landelijk Beleidskader* (LBK)) was established in 1993. The second such framework (LBK), was jointly introduced in 1998 with the first municipal educational compensatory policy (In Dutch: *Gemeentelijk Onderwijsachterstandenbeleid* (GOA)), and this ended in July 2002. The third LBK and the second GOA policy came into effect on 1 August 2002.

The second policy framework (LBK); the first GOA period (1998-2002)

In the early 1990s, a debate emerged about the possible decentralisation of educational compensatory policy as the experience of the first 20 years had not achieved the intended results. The idea that municipalities could better anticipate the needs of schools locally took hold and this ultimately resulted in decentralisation of these policies. The GOA municipalities acquired responsibilities and powers for the direct disposal of the relevant monies, with the August 1998 changes mentioned above. The Agreement on Targeted Consultation (In Dutch: *Op Overeenstemming Gericht Overleg* (OOGO)) made it obligatory for municipalities to confer with the governing bodies of the schools to draw up an action plan to realise a coherent compensatory policy. This local plan of action should also follow national policy framework guidelines.

Reasons for Educational Opportunity Policy

Halfway through the first GOA period, a fierce debate about multicultural society flared up. On average, migrants had a poorer education and suffered longer spells of unemployment than the rest of the Dutch population, and the general sense was that something had to be done. During the same period the Education Inspectorate found that the performance of 5 percent of schools was sub-standard. Investments in social priority policy, educational priority policy and the first national policy framework had not produced the desired results. Moreover, preliminary results from studies examining the effects of the 1998 GOA policy showed that municipalities had had major problems wresting themselves from national policy guidelines and actually anticipating local needs. Despite the initial intention of the state to set up a GOA monitor, it gradually became clear that the municipalities were left on their own for providing insights into local results.

Following heated debates in the Lower House, Educational Opportunity Policy was launched in February 2000. Halfway through the cycle of the municipal educational compensatory policy, a new level was added with the aim to give all pupils equal opportunities to develop their talents. In addition, the aim was to understand why schools in the apparently the same situation, in similar circumstances, reached different results. Specifically, why were approximately 5 percent of schools not able to provide good education?

The introduction of Educational Opportunity Policy -- gradually with national coverage

In May 2000, the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) led the way for this policy. Altogether, some 140 schools with educational disadvantages, with more than 50 percent of targeted pupils, were selected. The municipalities drew up plans of action to show how they intended to shape educational opportunities within the existing municipal educational compensatory policy. A year later, 32 municipalities with more than 100,000 inhabitants set to work in the same way. In total, there were in November 2002 around 350 schools spread throughout the Netherlands that can call themselves Educational Opportunity Schools.

Under the existing GOA policy, municipalities, schools and governing bodies of the schools were given leeway to shape educational compensatory policy, and municipalities had to invest in the school environment and governing boards were responsible for establishing favourable conditions within their schools. Educational Opportunity Policy went a step further. The schools became the starting points. Although municipalities had to draw up action plans, the aims would now be determined at school level. A mirror was held up to schools through dialogue based in inspection evidence, interviews, classroom consultations and other supplementary data. By asking the right questions, the aim was to identify what the real problems were in schools, which required solutions. Removing barriers to classroom teaching would enable schools to raise the performance of their pupils, through specific actions geared to specific circumstances.

Based on the diagnosis, the Educational Opportunity schools devised development plans, which, with their own objectives and visions, provide the guidelines for the future. For some schools it meant that they had first to determine exactly where they stood. Ultimately, SMART objectives (specific, measurable, acceptable and realistic goals that are products of their age) were formulated.

The school as starting point -- but with national support

Besides the financial impulse and the reversal of policy philosophy, Educational Opportunity brought changes in the approach to educational compensatory policy. Before, the municipalities, schools and governing bodies of the schools were largely on their own. The municipalities in particular, which had previously not been confronted with educational compensatory policy, had great difficulties charting their own courses through this persistent set of problems.

The support process entailed breaking the stigma imposed on Educational Opportunity schools and their communities by the media. Many of them had read newspaper reports that their schools were performing poorly. They began to use the media of communication to shake off the negative image that had plagued disadvantaged schools over the years. A new sense of openness developed which was special to education. Schools located in the same district, which had previously been unaware of each other, began to work together on school development plans. This led, for example, to the organisation of writing days. Schools decided to set up joint projects. Many municipalities also organised launch meetings for Educational Opportunity schools, attended by all the teachers.

Conclusion and discussion

As well as a turnaround in policy approach, Educational Opportunity has fostered a different way of looking at disadvantaged schools. Increasingly, they are being seen as learning organisations, not as failing schools. Already, Educational Opportunity Policy has revealed that some schools simply lack the prerequisites; sometimes municipalities and governing bodies have not assumed sufficient responsibility and left schools to fend for themselves. Educational Opportunity Policy offers schools a chance to reverse this process, with "development" as the operative word and educational policy an ongoing process. Modern society is more dynamic than ever, repeatedly subject to major changes. With the school as starting point and choosing concrete objectives, there are guidelines for the actions that schools can take. Leaving the choice with the schools emphasises their autonomy and uniqueness. There is, after all, no universal recipe for tackling educational disadvantage.

In future, the challenge will be to hold onto the reciprocity of educational compensatory policy. On the one hand, the schools will continue to require sufficient leeway to shape policies for educational opportunity according to their own perceptions. On the other hand, the state, municipalities and governing bodies of the schools will have to create sufficient conditions to make it possible for schools to do this, for it cannot be acceptable that lack of such conditions are the reason why quality lags behind in certain schools.