

Dutch Education: a closed or an open system?

Or: the art of maintaining an open system responsive to its changing environment

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1. Introduction

Some of the main questions in this conference on lifelong learning as an affordable investment are:

- What mechanisms do we need in order to get the best out of our people and how to get the best out of our schools?
- What is the role of the government and other parties in organising the necessary arrangements?

In this paper I will draw from experience in the Netherlands in order to show the difficulties and paradoxes that are met when trying to realise often proposed solutions such as voucher schemes, offering parents and students the right to choose their schools and their way of learning as they see fit, the creation of an "open" school system, allowing competition among providers of educational services and the access of new providers. It is often argued that meeting these conditions will lead to an innovative system, following the needs of society. My argument is not that those ideas are wrong, but I want to stress that it might be a too simple picture.

2. Background

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the development of a nationally organised educational system in the Netherlands. Although local authorities were initially responsible for finance, the national administration set requirements for teachers and the teaching provided. At the time, the provision of education and the establishment of schools were almost solely the preserve of the national administration. This centralisation encountered enormous opposition, and was one of the factors that sparked the separation of Belgium from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1830. During the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of this century, an increasing number of private schools were set up by organisations within the Catholic and Protestant communities. This was accompanied by growing pressure on the national administration to subsidise these private schools. The schools dispute, as it was called, ended in 1917, when private and public schools were given equivalent financial status under the Constitution. As a result, the Netherlands is in the unique situation, compared with the rest of the world, of having 70 per cent of its schools administered and governed by private school boards.

The Constitution thus guarantees "freedom of education", which embraces the freedom to set up schools, freedom to determine the principles on which they are based (freedom of conviction) and freedom of organisation of teaching. In principle: private schools can be established upon private initiative and administered by a governing body (legal person) by private law. From this point of view the Netherlands have a tradition of "public entrepreneurship".

The chief characteristic of this system is that the national administration is almost solely responsible for financing public and private schools and that parents are given the opportunity to choose the school which best matches their own ideological preferences. The equal treatment of public and private schools in terms of status and resources required

detailed legislation and regulations, chiefly with regard to school finance. This radically reduced the policy scope of the local authorities. Although they continued to administer public schools, they were now obliged to match every payment they awarded to the public schools over and above the grant awarded by the national administration with an equivalent payment to the private schools. The centralised regulations governing school finance led to the equal funding of all schools. Equal funding at a national level of all schools can thus be regarded as the outcome of the schools dispute.

But after the War there was growing awareness that equal treatment of students from different socio-economic backgrounds did not lead to equal opportunities. In particular, the educational performance of students from the lower socio-economic strata was poorer than that of students from higher strata. This argument led to changes in school finance in the Netherlands from the 1970s onwards. Over the years, a system was developed with the aim of compensating disadvantaged groups in two ways, firstly through 'weighted funding', whereby elementary schools receive more funding for students from underprivileged families, and secondly, on top of this, additional subsidies for schools located in districts and regions with a high number of underprivileged families. Under this weighted funding system, for every ethnic minority student, a school receives 1.9 times the amount paid for children from privileged environments. Native Dutch children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are awarded 1.25 times the basic amount per student. This system thus allocates more resources to schools with a relatively high proportion of students from underprivileged families.

This has led to a Schools system in the Netherlands with the following basic characteristics:

- a national funding scheme based on 'money follows students' and nation-wide equal treatment of schools;
- an "open system" as schools can be set up by groups of parents and are funded when basic requirements are met;
- students are weighted in order to compensate for ethnic and socio-economic background;
- parents have freedom of school choice.

From an outsiders view this regulation and allocation scheme can be regarded as an "open system" with the possibilities to meet social needs and social developments.

3. Developments in the 1970's and the 1980's

However, reality may prove to be a bit tougher.

- a. The equal funding of public and private schools was accompanied by legislation demanding schools to meet certain requirements for the curriculum and the qualifications of teachers. An important consequence of this system was that 'freedom of choice' and the existence of a large number of private schools did not lead to major variety or to differences in quality between schools. Public and private schools had to fulfil the same quality requirements, mainly based on input and process characteristics as proxies for real outcomes. Subsidies have allowed the private sector to expand but they have also led to regulation, thereby in fact making the private sector 'quasi-governmental'. Estelle James therefore once concluded perfectly that any evaluation of a voucher or grant system or other moves toward privatised education in the United States or Great Britain must take this possible dynamic process into account.
- b. Until the 1960s, parents rarely saw the concept of 'freedom of choice' in its contemporary sense of 'consumer choice'. It was simply assumed by everyone that children would attend the school that matched their parents' religious or other beliefs. Education provision and participation was therefore segregated along denominational

lines. An initial advantage of this system was that this led to an integration rather than a segregation of social classes: Catholic children from the lower strata went to the same schools as Catholic elite children, as was the case for the other denominations.

- c. In the Netherlands, the problem of achieving an equitable system of school finance appears to have found a satisfactory solution in that most of the resources are not being allocated to schools with children from prosperous families, but to schools attended by children from poorer families. However, schools awarded extra funding by the national administration for children from underprivileged groups appeared to use these extra resources mainly to reduce the size of classes. They rarely made a special effort (other than simply reducing class size) to meet the goal for which the extra funding was granted, namely individual attention for children from disadvantaged families.
- d. A strong secularisation of Dutch society, the decline of students after the baby boom and the influx of large numbers of immigrants - especially in the inner cities of the country's largest municipalities - have created a mismatch between the denomination of schools and their actual population. At the same time these processes increased the social segregation in Dutch schools. Thus, the established schools with an established teaching staff could continue to exist under very different circumstances without adapting and innovating fundamentally, although they had wide freedom to do so. This observation reflects the more general problem of a lack of real incentives to innovate curricula and to pay attention to the unique characteristics and needs of students.
- e. Views concerning the question as to whether private schools are of better quality than public schools are by no means unanimous. Yet this issue is in fact of secondary importance: the real question is whether freedom of choice can help to maintain or improve variety and quality in general. It is found that parents were given very little information about the quality of schools. And because there is little difference in the accessibility of schools, parents can in fact only base their choice on an affinity with the ideological principles of these schools (= denomination). Thus transparency and availability of information are crucial but not easily met conditions in two ways. (1) It offers parents opportunities to make a real choice and brings them in a position vis-à-vis the school and (2) it stimulates individual schools to pay attention to the provision of information about their profile and their performance.

Consequently, although characteristics such as freedom of choice and an open system of private schools may be necessary for maintaining and increasing the quality and variety among schools, they are certainly not enough on their own.

4. Recent developments

During the 1990's and especially under the new Government since 1998 a number of new developments and insights are visible.

- a. There has been an increasing awareness of the consequences of the rise of the education level among the population for the way social policy is organised. Educated parents organise their lives as they see fit and they want to educate their children in ways that are not met by the current schools. There is an increasing pressure to meet these individual needs of parents in many ways, for example:
 - The need to combine school attendance with high quality out-of-school-care in order to allow women to make their own career.
 - Parents want the best for their children and they perceive a disparity between what schools can offer on the one hand and (1) what is technically possible and (2) the "glossy" rich learning environment outside schools on the other. This puts a pressure on schools, although they are not well equipped to meet these new requirements.

- Students, youngsters have become more critical and feel themselves not attracted to what teachers can offer to them.
- b. The importance of ICT and its consequences is an increasingly dominant issue. There is a growing awareness that a complete redesign of education is inevitable. It will by no means be enough to adapt the organisation of the curriculum and the teaching style. ICT - in combination with some other trends – will affect all aspects of the system: the "market organisation", the division of labour in schools, the management-structure, the salary system, the kind of government regulation, etc.
- c. The remarkable growth of the Dutch economy in the last few years and its prospects offer new opportunities for both public and private investments in education. A problem for the Government is how to combine the available resources with innovation and to prevent that new money enforces old incentive structures and habits. Thus, new money has to be combined with innovation, whereas the introduction of new allocation schemes and responsibilities (e.g. for salary schemes) leads to resistance among the vested interests.
- d. At the same time private wealth increases with an even higher rate, allowing parents and companies to invest in education by sponsoring, by free parental contributions to subsidised schools, by buying auxiliaries such as extra private teaching and educational software and in some cases even by sending their children to a not-subsidised high quality/high cost private school, where their child can obtain an excellent teaching.
- e. The shortages for teachers on the labour market are another threat to the school system. A large part of the aged population of teachers will retire in the next five to ten years and schools already meet problems in attracting new teachers and professional school managers.

Against this background a number of Dutch policy-items and debates can be summarised as follows.

- a. Many private schools supplement their income by demanding a financial contribution from parents or by sponsor-money from companies. Officially, schools may not compel parents to pay such a contribution, nor may a refusal to pay this contribution be used as a reason for refusing admittance to a child. Many spokesmen in Parliament seek ways to resist such practices or to bind them to rules. They view it as a form of unacceptable inequality of opportunities for both schools and low SES students. However, the Dutch government is reluctant to forbid or highly regulate such contributions. The effectiveness of such measures is doubtful and could cause that parents seek other - less visible - ways to invest in the education of their children, sorting an even bigger and less visible inequality of opportunities. It is argued that the money now flows to existing schools and that it enforces the commitment of parents and companies to schools. At the same time the government launched a public information campaign informing parents that they are not obliged to pay the contributions demanded by schools and that schools may not refuse their children admittance on financial grounds.
- b. In order to create a climate of educational entrepreneurship, the current Government has a strategy to strengthen the management-capacity and innovative power of schools. One way is to diminish regulation and bureaucracy, e.g. in the negotiations between the government and intermediate representing organisations and bodies. Thus schools themselves - and not their representing bodies - should obtain real entrepreneurial power and tools. This is not easy path, but it is viewed as of crucial importance for the future quality and status of existing schools. Another way to enhance this development could

be the experimental introduction of so called "Regulation free schools", thus schools which are allowed to make their own business and innovation plan without hindrance of government regulation. Members of Parliament have asked for a proposal, but will they accept all of its consequences?

- c. At the same time the government and the schools seek ways to combine the need for large-scale management and support on the one hand and small-scale provision in the primary process on the other. One way to organise this combination could be a kind of franchising concept, whereby schools seek support in a large supporting entrepreneurial "mother-organisation" for their innovation and ICT-development, the schooling and acquisition of their teachers, the administration and the like. Regarding ICT the innovation is also to a large extent supported (but not directed) by the Government, being a spearhead as well (but not extensively discussed here).
- d. In order to cope with the teacher shortages and to stimulate "a new face" to the teaching profession there are debates about a new concept for the position and granting of teachers, more reflecting the current social climate. One proposal has been to create economic independent teaching communities. These communities as a whole (and not the individual teacher) should bear a collegiate responsibility for their performances and should also be organised, be paid and be accountable in accordance with this principle, as is the case in communities of lawyers, consultants and the like.
- e. A number of individual schools and big private school boards have launched plans for innovative learning strategies. They thereby move beyond the current regulation or are already experimenting with ways to make schools more attractive for youngsters. One way to do that is for example to allow them to attain education goals in ways that go beyond the current school concept (e.g. by seeking support elsewhere or by the combination of work with a learning program. (See also the OECD-program on schooling for tomorrow). Thus, the school organises the learning process for its students, without providing all the elements themselves.
- f. The present Dutch government is pursuing a policy aimed at providing local authorities with the instruments and financial resources they need to conduct an integrated local policy, but within the constraints of a system that assures public and private schools an equivalent basis to apply for extra municipal support, according to the principle 'equal resources for identical problems'. The main goals of the shift of emphasis to the level of local authorities is to enhance social innovation on a scale that reflects the problems of parents (combining their parental status with other activities) and children in their direct environment and in order to combat social inequality.
- g. The position of parents and students is also a spearhead. Whereas parents unquestioningly sent their children to the school that reflected their own religious beliefs, they are now becoming discerning consumers who are evaluating the quality of schools with a critical eye. Where possible, they make a conscious evaluation of the various schools in their area. As a result there is a need for relevant and reliable information about schools and opportunities for active parental involvement in the formulation of school policy. Officially, parents in the Netherlands already have advisory powers but these are not effective as their status is based on the 1970s idea of "participatory democracy" for both teachers and parents, not fitting with the current climate. New ways of organising the involvement of parents are now explored and discussed. Improving the information given to parents about schools is also an important spearhead in the Dutch government's schools policy. By now all schools are required to issue a school prospectus setting out their aims, activities and results. The correctness of

what the school is promising should be verifiable and could thus be validated by the national educational Inspectorate.