

Chapter 5

Transnational Forces in Dutch Educational Policies and Practices



Theo Wubbels and Jan van Tartwijk

Abstract This chapter discusses six transnational forces in Dutch education over the last 60 years. These forces were inspired for the larger part by a mix of elements with a societal background and by educational research studies: (1) New Public Management and the autonomy of schools' governing bodies; (2) Striving for equity in education which led to fighting early stratification; (3) Designing education and specifically teaching based on evidence with a continuous debate on what counts as evidence; (4) Social constructivism as a source for inspiration of a new pedagogy in secondary education; (5) The gimmick of the knowledge society and its curricular implications; and (6) International benchmarking of student outcomes. For the influence of the role of evidence in education and the social constructivist turn in education, the developments in the Netherlands seem to follow the transnational forces quite well with little national counterforces. For New Public Management and school autonomy, fighting early tracking, and international benchmarking, we can see that national influences among others inspired by the constitution are competing with the transnational ones and at times even seem to be stronger. Before discussing these forces, we sketch the Dutch educational system in order to understand the context of these forces in Dutch education. Specifically, we focus on the role of the Dutch constitution, the inspectorate, and the final examinations in secondary education in guaranteeing the quality of education. This chapter is concluded with a short note on the influence of digitalization and commercialization.

Keywords Tracking · Lump sum financing · Evidence-based · Constitution · Benchmarking

T. Wubbels (✉) · J. van Tartwijk
Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
e-mail: t.wubbels@uu.nl; j.vantartwijk@uu.nl

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Introduction

This chapter discusses six transnational forces in Dutch education over the last 60 years. To understand transnational forces in Dutch education, we will first sketch the educational system with its many different and strongly separated tracks in secondary education. How this system functions can only be understood through the influence of the Dutch constitution on educational debates in relation to the control mechanisms of the National Inspectorate of Education and the national examinations at the end of secondary education. These exams function on the one hand as a quality control mechanism, and on the other as a guidance for schools and teachers on what to teach and what not. A final characteristic of the Dutch educational system that we will describe, is the role of the governing bodies in the system.

System Characteristics

The Structure of the Dutch Educational System

The educational system in the Netherlands consists of 8 years of primary education (age 4–12, comprehensive) and four to 6 years of secondary education (tracked). After secondary education, students go to several forms of vocational and higher education. Secondary education in the Netherlands is highly tracked: students are sorted at the start of secondary education into five tracks (three general education and two pre-vocational education). It is difficult for students to move between tracks. The general education tracks range from lower general education (4 years, 27% of the students), higher general education (5 years, 23% of the students) to preparatory-university education (6 years, 23% of the students). The two pre-vocational tracks host 27% of the students. Students in various tracks in secondary education are often not in the same building, which increases the difficulty to move between tracks. Which track students go to is determined by secondary schools based on the recommendation of the teacher which is communicated to the parents or caretakers towards the end of the final year of primary school. This recommendation can be corrected if results of a school-leaving test, administered after the recommendation has been communicated, show that the advice of the teacher is too low. Cognitive abilities play a decisive role in this placement advice.

The track of secondary education, in turn, determines in which type of tertiary education students can enrol. Only students with a secondary diploma at the preparatory-university level can directly enrol in a research university. Higher general education graduates can enrol in universities of applied sciences that provide programmes for high level vocational education. Students from medium general education and the pre-vocational tracks can only follow up into programmes for medium level vocational education. Thus, the strict tracking in Dutch education results in important decisions of a child's future at the age of 12.

Constitution

Characteristic for the Dutch education system is the guarantee for freedom of education in article 23 of the constitution (Grondwet voor het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, 2008). This article was included in 1917 in the constitution as part of a historic compromise between Protestants, Catholics, and liberals about state-funding of education. This compromise “pacified” a long and heated debate that dominated Dutch politics in the previous 60 years and which is referred to as the “Schoolstrijd” (War on Education). The second paragraph of this article partially reads (translated into English): “Providing education is free, taking into account the government’s supervision of education and the government’s care for the competence and morality of teachers.” The interpretation of this article is a topic of debate because, on the one hand, freedom to provide education is proclaimed, but on the other hand, the government’s supervising role is also emphasized.

The historic 1917 compromise entailed that all schools, private or public, have the right to the same financial support from the government provided that the curriculum matches the government’s supervision criteria. Thus, when a group of parents can show the government that a school they want to start will attract a sizable number of students, they will get money to fund the school. In 1917, these were almost always Catholic or Protestant schools, but nowadays, also Islamic schools or schools with a particular pedagogical concept are founded and funded by the government on these conditions. At present, one-third of the primary schools are public schools (Ministerie van Onderwijs Cultuur en Wetenschap, 2014) and two-third are private (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2015). Also, there is consensus on the government’s care for the teacher’s competence and morality. The competences teachers need to have are described by law (Rijksoverheid, 2017). It is the government’s responsibility to decide on these competences based on proposals from, among others, the teacher unions. Teacher education institutions are required to prepare teachers according to these competencies.

Control Mechanisms

The meaning of the phrase in the constitution “supervision of the government” has been debated intensely. Nowadays, this debate has resulted in a balance between the Inspectorate of Education’s standards for the quality of education, which have a considerable impact on what is happening in schools, and the school’s freedom to make pedagogical choices. The government sets outcome standards for both primary and secondary education, but schools are free in how to reach these outcomes. Schools are also free to give teachers, students, or parents a say in this.

Regarding outcomes, national examinations at the end of each of the tracks of secondary education check if schools deliver the outcomes the government has proclaimed. How schools prepare students to pass these examinations is up to the

schools. When a considerable share of the students at a school does not pass the final secondary exams, the inspectorate will publish negative reports about the school, and in the end, the government may stop funding such a school. A similar control mechanism functions in primary education, where results on tests that are used to monitor students' progress can also be used by the inspectorate to monitor the quality of education. Thus, tests and examinations play an important role in quality control, and in practice also in shaping the curriculum schools offer. Schools often focus on high test results and what is needed to pass the examinations and such emphasis follows parents' pressures.

The inspectorate not only monitors the examinations results, but also some elements of the educational process, both in public and private schools. It also has the right to evaluate schools according to national standards regarding, among other things, the quality of the lessons, the number of students that leave the schools without a diploma or who would continue their education in a lower academic ability track, and the internal quality assurance system of the school. When one or more of these elements are below standards, schools can get a warning and if they are repeatedly below standards in the end a school can be closed. By law, the inspectorate also was assigned to report annually about "the state of education", to provide politicians insight in how schools are performing.

Governance

Above we wrote again and again "schools" when referring to what the rights, freedom, obligations etc. of schools are. This was in fact a shortcut for "the governing body of schools". These governing bodies can be regarded as the representatives of those who founded the schools shorter or longer ago. Often, they regard it as their mission to guard the specific character of their schools. More often however, they primarily regard it as their task to oversee the schools both from an administrative and a pedagogical perspective. All schools have a governing board that is the employer of a school's director or a board of directors that usually runs several schools. We refer to the governing board and the board of directors together as the governing body. The board of directors or the school directors oversee the daily running of a school or schools and are accountable to the governing board, functioning at some distance of the schools. This governing board discusses strategical issues with the board of directors, such as what kind of philosophy of education a school needs to have, the development of human resources, what the ideal number of students would be and, most importantly, housing and the financial situation and planning. In practice, the board of directors has a lot of freedom in and responsibility for the quality of education and the financial health of the schools.

There is a wide variation in the size of responsibility of these governing bodies. Some are huge entities, with the largest being responsible for over 60 schools of secondary education with over 60,000 students and an annual turnover of over 550 million euro. Others, a small minority, are responsible for just one primary school

with about 120 students and a turnover of 300,000 euros. The majority is between these extremes with larger entities in secondary than in primary education. There are two distinct types of governing boards respectively for public and private schools. The governing boards of public schools are appointed by the local community government: the city council. For the private schools the governing boards co-opt new members. Members of these boards usually are appointed for their expertise on finance, human resources, law, education, and housing. We will come back to the developments in the last 60 years that have led to this situation.

Transnational Forces in Dutch Education

New Public Management and Autonomy

The Dutch system of controlling output of schools in both primary and secondary education by respectively a national test and national examinations as described above, is in place for secondary education since 1920 and is closely connected to the freedom of education which is guaranteed in the constitution. One of the principles of New Public Management (NPM), the first transnational influence in Dutch education we discuss, is to govern through outputs rather than inputs (Lane, 2002; Sahlin-Andersson, 2001). Thus, controlling the quality of education through the final examinations in the Dutch system is a form of output control that can be considered NPM *avant la lettre*. The government sets the goals of education and checks if these are reached, and it is the freedom and responsibility of schools to shape the curriculum such that the goals are met at the end of primary and secondary education.

Many other elements of NPM, such as accountability checks and resigning from steering based on inputs, were not visible before the 1990s. When looking at the practice in primary and secondary education in the 1960s one can see that the government also put quite some emphasis on regulating through inputs. There were, for instance, very detailed rules for composing the students' and teachers' timetable of lessons and on what items how much money had to be spent. For most expenditures approval had to be given by the ministry of education. For example, hiring a new teacher had to be approved by the ministry and the ministry paid the school exactly the amount of money needed for the salary of the specific teachers hired. Also, the government determined the salaries of teachers. Payment to a school was based on the school showing the specific expenditures.

As of the 1970s, discussions on the autonomy of schools started. This was a specific element of the more general trend to make the government smaller and provide all kind of organizations with more autonomy. The discussion on more autonomy of schools got momentum in 1980 as part of a NMP orientation in the government's policy in a document on decentralization in educational policy (Klopprogge, 2008). It was felt that schools had to obey to too many very detailed rules and it was assumed that when governing boards of schools would have more

freedom in their acting and policies, they would be better equipped to cater for students' needs in a heterogeneous and dynamic society (Vrieze & van Gennip, 2006). As a condition, it was mentioned that governing boards would need sufficient competence and power to use this freedom in appropriate ways. The latter was a sign that the government was hesitating, more than for other sectors like railways, utilities, or health care, to give more autonomy in the education sector. One of the risks that was seen, was that some governing boards would not be capable to develop appropriate policies and that the schools therefore would need to be closed or put under government supervision. Another risk that was foreseen was that competition between schools would be on an unequal playing field when parents would be able to make financial contributions to the schools' financial resources.

Even though such risks were identified, the government wanted to introduce more autonomy, but it seemed to be an even stronger wish of the schools (Kloprogge, 2008). Many governing boards, and specifically the bigger ones, urgently requested more autonomy themselves to be able to adjust to local circumstances and developments. A school in a village might have different needs than an inner-city school. Also, a large teacher labour union asked for more autonomy in a report entitled "The Enterprising school" (ABOP, 1989). This report sketches an enterprising school as an independent organization that acts in accordance with economic principles.

It was only in the early 1990s that the government's reluctance faded away and the autonomy of schools really took off. In 1993 the associations of governing boards of schools in primary and secondary education came to an agreement with the national and local government about strong decentralization of the educational sector. Governing boards would become far less dependent in their policy from the national government. City councils, which were until then the governing boards of public schools, would be required to appoint independent governing boards for these public schools. Governing boards got a much more autonomous position to be able to act in specific local contexts (Schevenings Beraad Bestuurlijke Vernieuwing, 1994).

As of 2000, in educational policy more and more NPM characteristics such as increasing autonomy for schools, deregulation, economizing and possibilities for variation between schools were prominent. This is clear in the Ministry of Education policy letters in 1999 and 2000 emphasizing education quality, variation, and accessibility with local autonomy and less central regulations (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap, 1999, 2000). At the same time, in according with NPM principles, there appeared a tendency to use targets (e.g., number of students that pass the final examinations), performance indicators (e.g., the number of students that complete secondary education without grade retention) and accountability checks (e.g., an annual financial report and a report on examination grades) were part of the government's policy (Rutgers, 2004). In fact, many targets have been set in the last 30 years, covering a broad range of societal issues from including more special education needs' students in the mainstream classes, diminishing the amount of bullying, and improving the citizenship skills during primary education. Schools were required to account for how they worked on achieving these targets and what

their results were. It is now common practice that the central government provides general directions (e.g., more attention in the curriculum for the Dutch role in the slave trade) and gives schools the freedom how to do this in practice, but with the obligation to show afterwards how they did this and what the results were. Another example is the government's decision that schools need to have a quality system, including a school guide for parents and students, a complaints system, etc. It is up to the schools to develop such a system, with again the obligation to report on this system and the results achieved with it.

One of the ideas behind introducing autonomy increasing measures was, in line with NPM tenets, that through competition between schools, the quality of education would improve and that better performing schools would attract more students than lower performing schools. Waslander (2001) showed, however, that such a development could not be observed. In addition, drawbacks arose: for example, training for the test instead of an emphasis on learning; spending money on glossies instead of education; and competition between governing boards for the best housing which is provided by the city or village where schools are located.

All this did not mean that the government did not make educational policy anymore. Several educational reforms, to be described later in this chapter, were initiated by the government. These became the topic of an investigation by the Dutch Parliament of which the report was published in 2008 (Commissie Parlementair Onderzoek Onderwijsvernieuwing, 2008). The committee concluded that there was considerable political support when these reforms started and that, subsequently, their implementation had been very much top-down. Consequently, many teachers had felt that the innovations were forced upon them, be it by the governing bodies or by the government. This made many teachers feel that they lacked professional autonomy. Also, these innovations were considered by many teachers and the general public as unsuccessful. This lack of autonomy and failures hurt the teachers own and public esteem for the teaching profession.

A specific element of the autonomy of educational organizations was the gradual introduction of lump-sum financing. This movement already started in the 1960s of the previous century in higher education (Vossensteyn et al., 2017). As with the general trend toward school autonomy, also for the lump-sum financing some schools were more eager to get this than others and again, the government was hesitating to provide this freedom. Some schools resisted, because of the short-term negative consequences (Kloprogge, 2008). For example, all schools of the same size, would receive the same amount of money for the salaries. Schools with a relatively old and therefore expensive teacher team would have to spend more money for personnel than a school with a younger and thus cheaper teacher force. Thus, the former could less than the latter invest in material expenditures ranging from the maintenance of the building and cleaning to buying schoolbooks or computers. Because the schools did not have a say in the level of the teacher salary, this was felt to be unrealistic and unfair. Also, for example the rule about the number of lessons a student had to follow could lead in a school with high personnel costs to making classes bigger which could have negative effects on the education quality. Combining the introduction of lump-sum financing with maintaining all kind of rules was rather

different from decentralizing tendencies in other sectors where, e.g., the railways became fully independent from the government with accountability afterwards for mutually agreed targets for punctuality of the trains.

Gradually this lump-sum financing was introduced in all educational sectors, in secondary education in 1996 and primary education in 2006. The reasons for these differences in timing were the scale of the institutions. It was assumed that the bigger an institution was, the easier, more successful, and profitable it would be to grant it the lump-sum financing (Vrieze & van Gennip, 2006). In higher education already in the 1960s institutions were relatively big with many institutions hosting over 10,000 students. However, in primary education, at that time, many schools had no more than 150 pupils. As a side effect of the general trend toward autonomy, the governing bodies responsible for schools started to merge into bigger unities to be better equipped to use the expected autonomy and to spread the risks for smaller units connected to a lump-sum financing. Now, a primary governing board can have the responsibility (and possibility to shift money between buildings) over 40 or 70 schools each with 200 pupils. Thus, an extra layer in the system has been created: powerful governing bodies of several schools. The trend towards more autonomy for individual schools thus was hampered by the introduction of this extra governing layer. Policy making that was the task of the ministry before, is now quite often the responsibility of the governing bodies of schools.

Equity in Education: Fighting Early Tracking

In 1968, Rosenthal and Jacobson published their famous book “Pygmalion in the Classroom” (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). They described experiments in which teacher expectations were manipulated by telling teachers that some of their students had high IQs, even though in fact these students had been randomly selected. It was said that the experiments showed that (false) teacher expectations did influence teacher behavior towards students and that consequently the relative performance of these students increased. Although these experiments were rightly criticized (e.g., Wineburg, 1987), these findings sparked worldwide movements for equity in education, the second transnational influence in Dutch education. Educational equity was considered vulnerable for false teacher expectations based on students’ social economic status (SES) and gender. In the Netherlands, this vulnerability was even greater than elsewhere because of the tracked secondary education system. This system might force students into a premature, primarily socially conditioned, and gendered choice for a school career (Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, 1986). Evidence shows that the earlier students are out into a specific track the more students from parents with a high SES are favoured (OECD, 2013). Comparisons with educational systems in other countries were often used to argue that this early tracking should be postponed to a later age (e.g., Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy, 1986). Therefore, starting from the 1960’s, attempts to reform the early tracking system were initiated

primarily by social-democratic politicians and educational researchers. However, these efforts had little results, because there was and is no political consensus on the need for postponement of the tracking.

Already back in 1968, a law was introduced to make the first year of secondary education a year to orient students on what would be the best track for them. This “brugjaar” (bridging year) was placed in schools that usually offered a limited number of tracks, for example only general or only vocational tracks, and so the determination of the track was not effectively postponed. In the 1970’s, experiments were run for several years in a limited number of schools with comprehensive education. Students in these schools, irrespective of their cognitive ability, were in the same class for 3 years. In this way, the choice for a particular track was postponed 3 years. The social democrats saw this as a good solution for a substantial problem, but other political parties, specifically the liberals, were more concerned about the possible negative effects for the cognitively most able students. These students might be kept behind because teachers would focus on the less able students (van Dijk, 2008). In the end, these experiments were stopped, but the discussion continued.

From 1993 onwards, a “basic curriculum” including 14 subjects with standardized goals was implemented in the first 3 years of secondary education for all students. The original goals of this reform were to pay more attention to the development of skills in the curriculum and to postpone the tracking of children at the age of 12 until 14. Both aims sought to strengthen the chances on good education for all students specifically those coming from low SES families. However, the reform became the topic of a heated debate and only a weak version of the original plan was implemented: all students had to take the 14 subjects and reach the common goals, but they would do that *within* tracks for which they were selected at the age of 12. Although there were schools offering several tracks, moving between tracks was still very difficult. The basic curriculum met with much resistance and ultimately was eliminated in 2006.

In 1999–2002, a reorganization of the lower levels of secondary education was introduced, combining medium general education with lower vocational education in one track with the aim to create more pathways for students in these schools. This reform was relatively successful, although at first the image of the new track was rather negative because it was perceived as a school type for students who couldn’t succeed in the other levels. In addition, in this school type the other tracks described in the introduction still were present.

This section has described several attempts over a long-time span to postpone students’ choice for a school career. These attempts were by and large not successful, and the Netherlands continues to stay in an internationally rather isolated position with its early tracking. It seems that in this case national forces won over the transnational forces.

What Counts as Evidence in Designing Education and Teaching

A third influential transnational agenda in the Netherlands was and is the “what works movement” that raises the question what counts as evidence in educational research and practice. In the 1970s and 1980s, so-called process-product research dominated research on “good” teaching (see, for example, Brophy & Good, 1986). In this type of research, quantitative data were collected on the teaching behavior of teachers in the classroom using systematic observations (process), after which the association with students’ cognitive learning as determined by scores on tests (product) was investigated. Under controlled conditions, it was subsequently examined whether specific teaching behavior indeed led to the intended effects, after which teachers could be trained in this behavior (Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986).

The what works movement started in the USA in 1986 largely based on results of process-product research, when a government designed booklet “What works: research about teaching and learning” (Bennet, 1986) was published. This brochure with 41 research results was meant to be used as a practical guide for parents and teachers seeking those educational practices found to be most effective in helping children to learn. This booklet and its second version with 19 more findings (Bennet, 1987) were the start in educational policy in the USA and other countries of an emphasis on teaching based on what research can tell schools and teachers to teach effectively, and also how parents can support their children’s development. The booklet included interventions in the classroom, the home environment and for improving school effectiveness.

The Netherlands followed this movement rather quickly. In 1991 a book supported by a grant from the government was published entitled “School examples” (Meijnen et al., 1991). The book described for about 30 themes short conclusions from research in the USA that were corroborated by research results in the Netherlands. This research used several research methods, qualitative and quantitative, but very few quasi-experimental and randomized controlled studies. As the USA version, the book had three sections: home environment, teaching, and the school. It focused on effective education for at-risk students. For every theme a list of studies was used to support a conclusion for action or intervention. E.g., one of the conclusions was that teachers having high expectations for their students and showing these expectations, realize higher student results than teachers with low expectations. This conclusion was supported referring to five studies from the USA and seven from the Netherlands. In addition, conclusions from Dutch practice and portraits of effective Dutch schools were presented.

In the 1980s and 1990s, process-product research was increasingly criticized because it was found that what successful teachers do has much more to do with how they respond to the specific needs of their students in various everyday teaching situations than with the systematic application of certain behavioral routines (e.g., Calderhead, 1996). Nevertheless, since 2000, the attention for research into effective teacher routines increased again. One reason for this revival was the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act in the USA by the Bush administration in

2001. This legislation assumed that using high and measurable goals would improve educational outcomes. It required states to establish standardized assessments and schools to rely on scientifically based research for programs and teaching methods. The act defines this as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs”. Scientifically based research results in “replicable and applicable findings” from research that used appropriate methods to generate persuasive, empirical conclusions (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002).

In the Netherlands, we saw both support for this revival and criticism. There has been a continuous and vigorous debate on the possibilities to teach according to evidence from research. In 2006, the “Onderwijsraad” (Education Council), the most important advisory council of the government on educational issues, argued that research after an explorative phase always would have to come to experimental studies with control groups to test relationships between teachers’ actions and student learning. The council considered this approach, that resembled the earlier process-product studies, necessary for evidence-based teaching. For the introduction of the results of educational research in practice, the council advocated to develop directives for teacher actions and teaching protocols and a role for the inspectorate to monitor if the directives and protocols were followed in practice (Onderwijsraad, 2006). These recommendations of the council have not been put in practice. There were severe criticisms on these lines of thinking for example by Stevens (2006) who introduced theory about education and the educational process as missing elements in the discussion about teaching effectiveness. He rejected the possibility to acquire evidence from teaching experiments, because such experiments in his view cannot take the idiosyncratic processes into account that make learning individually unique and highly dependent on the interaction and relationships between individuals, that is between students and their teacher. He considered such experiments as too simplistic to describe the complex educational processes and to provide advice for teachers in practice who must cope with these idiosyncrasies. These experiments cannot include sense making processes that in Stevens’ view are essential for educational practice; processes that need to result in activities and environments that are perceived as meaningful by participants, both students and teachers. Experiments never can sufficiently take the practical teaching and learning situations into account which would make these experiments (or quasi-experiments) valid: ecological validity of the experiments is always poor. Stevens referred to an example: direct instruction might work for a motivated student but not for an uninterested one. Gravemeijer and Kirschner (2007) analysed in depth the shortcomings of the Education Council’s approach to educational research for practice. They argued that such experimental research was not feasible, far too expensive, and too generalizing. It would show that an approach would work, but not how it worked, and such insight is needed for professionals to be able to use research results in a deliberate manner.

The Parliamentary committee that studied innovations in 2008 (Commissie Parlementair Onderzoek Onderwijsvernieuwing, 2008) also investigated the role of evidence in these innovations. It concluded that scientific evidence had only played

a marginal role when developing the educational reforms and that the own, individual experiences of the policy makers and their circles had often been more important. The committee pleaded for basing educational innovations on sound empirical evidence. If such evidence was not available, innovations should always be piloted on a small scale and be monitored and evaluated by scientific research. However, what counts as sound empirical evidence was not clear. In the 2014 report of the Dutch committee on the future of the educational sciences, the conclusion was drawn that such evidence should be developed, and that different types of research should be used to inform education. The committee used the term evidence-informed as a replacement for evidence-based. This term puts the emphasis on the role of the professional in using evidence adapted to his or her local circumstances (Commissie Sectorplan Onderwijswetenschappen, 2014, p.4). When analysing the documents of the Dutch parliament, one can see that nowadays most politicians and certainly the civil servants in the ministry of education use the term evidence-informed rather than evidence-based.

The plea by the Parliamentary committee that innovations should always be based on sound empirical evidence, fuelled the interest in education for the work of international authors such as Hattie (2009), Marzano (whose 2003 book “What works in education” was published in Dutch in 2007) and Slavin (2014). In practical publications and policy documents, elements can be seen referring to prescribing effective teaching and the teacher as a deliberate professional.

Nearly 30 years after the book “School examples” (Meijnen et al., 1991), books were published in the Netherlands entitled “On the shoulders of giants” (Kirschner et al., 2018) and “Twelve lessons for effective teaching” (Surma et al., 2019), in which insights from cognitive psychology (again primarily from USA research) were translated into recommendations for teachers. These books’ approach differed substantially from the 1991 book following the critique on teacher effectiveness research. Whereas the School Examples book in fact prescribed what effective interventions were, the Kirschner et al. (2018) book was based on 24 seminal articles and some subsequent studies to illustrate how research could inform deliberate teacher actions. E.g., the first chapter describes the Bloom (1984) paper on studying methods for group instruction that are as effective as one-to-one tutoring. Based on this paper and subsequent work several recommendations were presented such as “mastery teaching in combination with activation of prior knowledge is a powerful strategy” and “one-to-one teaching is the most powerful teaching strategy, but happily there are strategies to peer with this in a class”. Similarly, the role of context in learning was illustrated based on the Brown et al. (1989) paper on situated cognition.

The Meijnen et al. (1991), Kirschner et al. (2018) and Surma et al. (2019) books are three publications in a rather long list of all kinds of publications covering what research can tell educational professionals. Another example is a volume edited by Beijaard (2016) that presented for teacher educators research evidence for their teacher education programs. Its title “Knowing what works” makes clear in what tradition it stands. The adagium that interventions should only be implemented when these have been proven to be effective is still powerful today. In 2021, for instance, the government provided the education sector with 8500 million euros to

help counter negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning. This (for the Netherlands) huge amount of money was only to be spent on proven effective interventions (Ministerie van Onderwijs en Wetenschappen, 2021). To help schools with identifying this evidence, a list of evidence was published. The basis for this list was provided by the summaries of research on the website of the UK-based Education Endowment Foundation (2016), the Teaching and Learning Toolkit. This again illustrates the strong transnational influences on education, educational research, and educational policy in the Netherlands.

Social Constructivism: A New Pedagogy in Secondary Education

Social constructivism, the fourth transnational influence in Dutch education, is a theory of learning or an epistemological theory (e.g., Phillips, 1995; Von Glasersfeld, 1996) that has become rather popular in educational research and consequently has influenced educational policies in several countries. Its main tenet is that knowledge is constructed by learners and often this is described as an active process of the learner. The latter better can be described as an activity because it is not necessarily a purposeful activity. Furthermore, in social constructivism, learning is situated and the process of construction is a social process that proceeds in interaction with other persons and/or materials (Simons et al., 2000). Quite often this social constructivism is translated into a prescriptive theory of teaching that assumes that teachers should not lecture but be coaches of students and should bring students together in groups to learn. Teaching should support active and self-regulative learning. We think this is a misinterpretation, because constructivism is an epistemological theory and has no evident clear-cut pedagogical implications: for example, students can (and do) construct knowledge when a teacher is lecturing (Nathan & Sawyer, 2014).

Based on these social constructivist ideas that aimed at active and self-regulative learning (Simons, 2000; Simons et al., 2000), in 1998 in the Netherlands a reform of the pedagogy in the last 2 years of higher general education and the last 3 years of preparatory-university education was introduced. The most prominent and most debated element of this innovation was that schools could implement the “studiehuis” (study house), which many schools did. The study house was a radical shift in the pedagogical approach in classes towards student independent and self-responsible learning and inquiry. For teachers, it meant a shift in their role from being the source of knowledge to act as a supervisor, coach, and facilitator of learning. This approach was referred to as “new learning”. From a policy perspective, the main aim of the study house was to strengthen students’ chances for completing higher education successfully, by providing a better preparation in secondary education for how students were supposed to study in higher education. Such preparation might compensate for differences in support that parents or caretakers from high and low SES can provide their children with. Parents from high SES more than from

low SES have completed higher education themselves in the Netherlands just like almost all other countries.

When it was proposed, many school leaders and teachers were positive about the study house, but in practice it turned out hard to implement (e.g. Van Veen et al., 2005). Furthermore, although schools were free to implement the study house or not, many teachers did not feel they had a say in if and how this reform was implemented (Commissie Parlementair Onderzoek Onderwijsvernieuwing, 2008). Although the study house was not a success the narrative of “the teacher as coach instead of transmitter of knowledge” still is powerful in the educational policy and in teacher education programs (Richter et al., 2021). That means that the constructivist move in education, which is a transnational agenda, continues to influence Dutch education.

The Knowledge Society and Curriculum Content

To keep up with Asia and the USA, in 2000 the heads of governments of the member states of the European Union agreed that by 2010, Europe should have “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” (European Parliament, 2000). Interestingly, in this aim also greater social cohesion is mentioned. The background of this for the Netherlands was the tension between globalizing forces and the preservation of national values in a context of voluminous and increasing immigration. This immigration transformed the Dutch culture into a multicultural society with tensions between groups with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Advisory councils of the government produced reports on this national identity in the context of ever stronger globalization already back in 1999 (Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 1999) and among others in 2007 (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2007). These reports were published considering a continuous concern about losing the national identity. In the discussions on the content of the curriculum that will be reported on below this concern plays a continuous role.

To achieve the goal of becoming a knowledge-based economy, innovation should become the motor for economic change, and European economies should transform from industrial into knowledge intensive. Although it is generally accepted that this ambition failed, the idea that European countries should transform their economies had its impact on the educational debate in the Netherlands, the fifth transnational influence. One of the issues was that students as the workers of the future should acquire “21st century skills”: a rather vague and wide-ranging label for a broad range of skills such as being able to learn independently and handle digital technology, being creative, entrepreneurial, communicative, and critical.

After the publication in 2008 of the report of the parliamentary committee investigating the educational innovations in the previous decades, for some years no educational innovations were initiated by the government at all. However, 5 years later

public and scientific pressure increased to “update” the curriculum following the transnational trend. A report was published by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2013) on the need to strengthen the development of the Dutch economy into a “knowledge economy”. The council suggested that one of the tasks for the government was to reform the curriculum:

A third task is to review the content of education. The Netherlands has a long tradition of educational freedom, which has the downside that there is hardly any public debate about what content education should convey. There is no national curriculum, and about the question of how much attention 21st century skills (learning to learn, taking initiative, perseverance, cooperation, etc.) deserve, there are circulating mainly individual opinions. A business approach is necessary here. This also entails a reorientation on the distinction between vocational education and education aimed at cognition (page 14).

One year later, the Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2014) published a report on the innovation of the curriculum. This council concluded that no procedures were in place for initiating curriculum reforms aimed at incorporating twenty-first century skills in these curricula. In this same period, concerns started to increase about the quality of education, for which the annual reports of the Inspectorate of Education about the decline of the position of Dutch education in international rankings were one of the main sources.

That same year, the ministry of education responded by starting the program “Onderwijs2032” (Education2032). The aim of this program was to advice the ministry about the knowledge domains and skills to be included in the curriculum. Based on an internet consultation aimed at involving the general public in the discussion about the content of the curriculum, a large number of meetings and discussions with stakeholders, scientific insights, and examples from other countries, the program management of Onderwijs2032 advocated in its final report (Platform Onderwijs2032, 2016) to start the development of a core curriculum (cf., Wetenschappelijke Curriculumcommissie, 2020). In this core-curriculum, amongst others, “broad cross-curricular skills” should be given a permanent basis. Also, citizenship education, national values, and digital literacy should have a place in this core curriculum.

The recommendations of Onderwijs2032 (Platform Onderwijs2032, 2016) were fiercely debated in the media. In these debates, opponents often referred to the recommendations of the parliamentary committee on educational innovation, that the government should abstain from large-scale reforms when support from teachers was not guaranteed, and proper scientific evidence was not available.

Despite the lack of support, a follow-up program was started to further elaborate the plans. In this program, “Curriculum.nu” (Curriculum.now), organizations of school administrators from primary and secondary education took the lead, together with organizations for students, parents, and subject teachers. In October 2019, the proposals of this program were published (Coördinatiegroep Curriculum.nu, 2019). Some months later, these proposals were discussed in parliament after hearings with proponents and opponents of the proposals. It became clear after the hearings that many controversies still existed and it was decided to pause the implementation of

the proposals. First, a committee of scientists should review the proposals and advise the minister about follow-up actions. This committee was installed in September 2020 and has now advised to go ahead with some of the reforms, but in a far more modest form.

These, until now, unsuccessful reforms of the curriculum were initially started because of concerns about the contribution of education to realize the ambition to develop the Dutch (and European) economy into a knowledge economy. Because the goals of the reforms were not formulated clearly enough, and the proposals were not supported by scientific evidence and because many teachers were not convinced of the necessity of the reforms, the process of the curriculum reforms has been delayed considerably. Also, in the debate about these reforms, the initial intention to contribute to the development of the economy of the Netherlands as a knowledge economy is hardly mentioned anymore.

International Benchmarking

As in many other countries, international comparisons of the performance of the national educational system based on students taking the same test in many countries, have a strong impact on the perception of the quality of the Dutch educational system. This sixth transnational influence is one of the most visible transnational educational forces in the Netherlands. Before the turn of the century, international comparisons of the performance of educational systems, had always been rather favourably for Dutch education. In the 2000's, however, the relative position of Dutch education started to decline slowly. This coincided with the increasingly negative public perception of the educational reforms that were started in previous decades, and described earlier in this chapter.

To map the influence of international comparisons, we analysed the digitally available annual reports of the Inspectorate of Education on the state of Dutch education in the period 2006–2020 using the search-terms “International*; Pisa; Timms, Pirls”. These analyses illustrate the impact of international comparisons on the perception of the quality of Dutch education.

Overall, the reports first mention that Dutch education is falling in the ranks because other countries are progressing. From 2012 onwards, it is observed that the level of performance itself appears to be declining in international comparative tests. This was reflected in articles in national newspapers with headings such as “The Inspectorate of Education rings the alarm bell, the Netherlands is losing its international top-position” (NRC, April 11, 2018) and “Better education requires a new war on education” (Volkskrant, January 8, 2020). In the last article, after referring to the Dutch scores on the PISA-tests, an editor wrote:

Since 2000, school performance in all three areas (reading, mathematics, science) has steadily declined. Reading has gone downhill in the last six years, so that the Netherlands has fallen below the average of the rich countries. In 2012, the [best Dutch students] did not score nearly as well as those from New Zealand, South Korea, or Finland. The [less

proficient students] were the ones who kept the Netherlands afloat. But now precisely that group of students has cracked through the ice. [...] Next to a parliamentary investigation, it will require a tough war on education to turn the tide.

On a more detailed level, in consecutive years several different issues are emphasised, and not always consistently. For example, in 2006 it is noted that the performance of Dutch education is satisfactory and stable in international comparisons, but there is concern about the low percentage of graduates (specifically female) in the science domain compared with other European countries. In 2007, however, concerns are mentioned about the percentage of young people with low reading skills, being high compared with other countries and there is also concern about declining basic arithmetic skills. In 2008, also falling math performance is mentioned as a problem, whereas in 2009 it is noted that Dutch students in math still test far above the international average. A topic related to performance that is mentioned consistently in several years, is the relatively small gap between low and high achievers, which is on the one hand considered a merit of the Dutch educational system because of the positive relation with educational equity, but on the other hand is considered a problem because it is interpreted as too little attention for the needs of high achievers.

Looking at these reports over the years, it is clear that international studies have a strong influence on the evaluation by the inspectorate of the state of affairs in Dutch education, which in turn have a strong impact on the public perception of the quality of education. However, the use of these international studies seems not to be systematic or consistent over the years.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we discussed six transnational developments that have considerably influenced Dutch education in the last 50 years. We aimed to show that transnational influences on Dutch education are amply visible. However, what exactly these influences bring about is not straightforward.

For the influence of the role of evidence in education and the social constructivist turn in education, developments in the Netherlands seem to follow the transnational forces quite well with little national counterforces. For the New Public Management and school autonomy, fighting early tracking, and international benchmarking, we can see that national influences are competing with the transnational ones and at times even seem to be stronger.

In the case of the schools' autonomy, following NPM influences, the constitution might have hindered providing autonomy because of the phrase in it "taking into account the government's supervision of education". This responsibility of the government mentioned in the constitution might explain that the NPM initiated pursuit for more autonomy was only reluctantly followed by the government. In fact, all along the line, steps toward more autonomy were rather small and these were

combined with many safeguards to prevent misuse of autonomy or unwanted negative effects on use of resources or pedagogy. The rather strict role of the inspectorate and the consequences of negative evaluations severely limited this autonomy. Thus, the specific national context may have made this transnational influence on schools' autonomy less prominent in the Netherlands than in some other countries.

When looking at the transnational trend toward equity in education it is striking that early tracking is still prominent despite several attempts to postpone the age at which students must be placed in a track. Here, another part of the constitution might have worked against this transnational influence. Robust counterforces, for example the Christian-Democrats whose electorate had a strong interest in freedom of education, argued again and again against an obligatory postponement of the age of tracking for all students. They did not oppose against a possibility for a later choice for students if parents or schools want that, but they wanted freedom of choice, no obligation (van Dijk, 2008). This reasoning is connected to the constitution with its fundamental right of freedom for school governing bodies to decide on the pedagogy.

The transnational influence on the curriculum became more prominent because of concerns about the contribution education should make in realizing the ambition to develop the Dutch economy into a knowledge economy. These concerns were fueled by the declining position of Dutch education in international comparisons. This transnational influence was joined with nationalist forces that feared to lose national values and emphasized citizenship education (e.g., SLO, 2015). It is striking that initial more radical proposals to innovate the curriculum were heavily debated. This debate resulted in proposals for modest changes with little reference to the development of the economy. It is not far-fetched to refer again to the constitutional freedom of education as an important cause for the resistance against radical changes. This freedom seems to be the central underlying dimension to be taken into consideration when analyzing the impact of transnational forces on Dutch educational policies and practices.

In this chapter, we focused on six specific transnational forces in education in the Netherlands, but we certainly do not claim that these are the only ones. An example of an influence that we did not describe in detail, is the impact of digitalization that was discussed extensively in the first chapter of this book. That doesn't mean that this transnational force did not have an impact in the Netherlands. On the contrary, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital infrastructure has become more important than ever in the Netherlands, increasing schools' dependency on international (Ed)Tech companies. Regarding a second example, the commercialization of education, we could have described the huge influence in education of commercial publishers, who publish teaching materials that are used by nearly all schools. We could also have focused on the increasing popularity of "shadow education": extra lessons provided outside the school by commercial institutions (sometimes one individual person). Estimations on the extent of this education differ, but probably between 20 and 25% of the students use such extra lessons.

Even though we have not been comprehensive in our description and analysis of transnational forces in Dutch education, we hope to have illustrated that these influences have a strong impact, but that what exactly this impact is, is mediated by national and even local circumstances and cultures.

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