



THE SCHOOL OF THE OTHERS. THE NETHERLANDS

A comprehensive overview of the Dutch education system and the challenges it is facing

Citation: A. van Mameren (2023), *The school of the others. the netherlands* in “Dynamis. Rivista di filosofia e pratiche educative” 5(2): 61-71, DOI: 10.53163/dyn.v5i5.207

ANNEBET VAN MAMEREN

Independent Education Consultant “New2NL”

Copyright: © 2023 A. van Mameren. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Fondazione Centro Studi Campostrini (www.centrostudcampostrini.it) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Abstract:

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the Dutch education system, highlighting its structure, key characteristics and challenges. It begins by outlining the current structure of the system for primary and secondary education. It then examines the country’s historical context with the political school struggle (after which the most important education law was created), the main pedagogical principles that have shaped the Dutch education system, and the importance for parents to have the freedom of school choice. Each educational level is discussed in terms of its goals, curriculum, funding and assessment methods, with an emphasis on the unique features and policies specific to the Dutch system. Moreover, the various routes to becoming a teacher in the Netherlands, as well as the role of teachers in society, are described. An overview analysis of the strengths of the Dutch education system is presented, including the high quality of education, the emphasis on child-led education and individual capabilities, the partnership between parents and teachers, and the strong position of vocational education. Furthermore, there is an investigation into the current challenges and reforms faced by the system, the impact of globalization, the consequences of the pandemic lockdowns, the integration of technology into education, and the decline in scores for reading comprehension compared to other OECD countries. One of the biggest challenges in Dutch education is the teacher shortage, which has a number of causes, including retiring teachers, too much pressure on the shoulders of especially the starting teachers, too many children in class who need more attention, and the high number of teachers working part-time. The consequences of this shortage are most visible in schools with a less privileged population in the bigger cities. Overall, this article offers a comprehensive understanding of the Dutch education system and highlights its achievements, and areas for growth and improvement.

Keywords: education, Netherlands, freedom of choice, globalization, teacher shortage

1. Can you describe the current structure of the school system in The Netherlands, from 6 years of age up to University (excluded), specifying the different pathways and thresholds relating to compulsory schooling?

Start of primary school

In the Netherlands, for most children their school career starts the day after their fourth birthday, whenever that is throughout the year. They then join “group 1”, which is often combined with “group 2”. These two years are comparable to kindergarten, and are part of primary school.

From the first school day of the month following their 5th birthday, all children are obliged to go to school (this obligation is called *leerplicht* in Dutch). This means that the first year of school is rather flexible.

In groups 1/2 they focus on learning through play, structure, social skills, independence, and gradual preparation for reading and writing. The ‘real’ academic work starts in ‘group 3’, when most children are six years old. As odd as it may sound, the transition from group 2 to 3 is sometimes not very straightforward. Most schools use 1 January as the cut-off date, and most children born before 1 January stay less than 2 years in kindergarten.

Children born after 1 January usually stay in groups 1/2 for longer than 2 years. For children born between mid-October and the end of December it is a bit of a grey area. Depending on their maturity, socio-emotional development, and interest in reading and writing, the teacher will decide whether it would be better for them to stay in group 2 or move up to group 3.

There is no stigma on repeating the year in the Netherlands, and in the higher groups of primary school, the age gap between the youngest and the oldest is very easily 1 to 1.5 years. This only gets bigger in secondary school and university. For each individual child, a decision is made about which is the best next educational step for them.

Secondary school recommendation

Most pupils are 12 years old when they are in ‘group 8’, the last year of primary school. Based on the teacher’s recommendation and their results for the obligatory transition test, they transfer to a suitable secondary school. The transition test is a standardised aptitude test focusing on comprehensive (Dutch) reading, spelling and grammar, as well as mathematics. This is not an exam which pupils can pass or fail.

The group 8 teacher bases their recommendation on factors like the child’s test scores of the past three years, interests, intelligence, motivation, study skills, eagerness to learn and ambitions.

Secondary school

The structure of Dutch secondary schools is rather complex. There are basically three levels: VMBO, HAVO and VWO. The main goal is that everyone gets a diploma at a suitable level, which allows them to follow education according to their own interests and capabilities.

VWO, which stands for *voorbereidend wetenschappelijk onderwijs* - pre-university education, takes 6 years, and gives you straight access to (a research/analytical) university.

HAVO equals senior general secondary education (*hoger algemeen voortgezet onderwijs*). With a HAVO diploma – after 5 years of study – you can either move onto the 5th year of VWO, or go to HBO, which is a university of applied sciences. With a HBO bachelor’s diploma, you could continue with your master’s at a research university, if you want. Some HBO studies also offer a master’s programme themselves.

VMBO is pre-vocational secondary education (*voorbereidend middelbaar beroepsonderwijs*). With a VMBO diploma (4 years), you can go to 4 HAVO, or to MBO, which is a school for vocational education, where the students learn a profession.

Most secondary schools combine multiple levels in the first year (sometimes the first two or even three years), which is called a bridge class. In this way, the streaming is postponed.

Subjects

A few subjects are compulsory for everyone, independent of the educational level. Examples are: Dutch and English language and literature, social studies, and cultural and artistic education, as well as PE (gym class). In most cases, students also need to pick some type of maths, and one other foreign language – often German or French. Some schools also offer Spanish, Italian, Turkish, Arabic or Russian.

VMBO

VMBO students specialize in one of four sectors, combining general and vocational education:

- Technical
- Agriculture
- Economics
- Care & Welfare

For VMBO students, the number of exam subjects in the final year varies between five and seven, depending on the chosen profile.

HAVO and VWO

The biggest differences between HAVO and VWO are, firstly, that VWO students spend one additional year in school. During their six years of study, the VWO students get to study more materials and in a more analytical way compared to their peers at HAVO. Secondly, VWO students need to take their national exams in at least eight subjects, and for HAVO, seven subjects.

Thirdly, VWO students must add at least one other foreign language besides English.

Gymnasium vs. Atheneum

To make it even more complicated, there are two types of VWO: *Gymnasium* and *Atheneum*. The difference between the two is that *Gymnasium* students must study Latin and Ancient Greek language and culture. There is no university study for which *Gymnasium* is a requirement, although it has its benefits when someone aims to study in the areas of, for example, medicine, law, Italian or Spanish.

Profiles

At the end of the 3rd year of HAVO and VWO, the students have to choose one of four profiles with subjects that prepare them for their further studies. In addition to the above-mentioned obligatory subjects, each profile includes two or three other subjects that are mandatory.

The **Science & Technology** profile emphasizes natural sciences, and includes the compulsory subjects of Physics, Chemistry, and Maths B, which focuses on algebra, geometry and calculus.

The **Science & Health** profile, with an emphasis on biology and natural sciences, requires Biology, Chemistry, and Maths A, which focuses on statistics and stochastics.

The **Economics & Society** profile focuses on social sciences and economics, with the compulsory subjects of Maths A, Economics and History.

The **Culture & Society** profile emphasizes arts and foreign languages, and the students have to take final exams in History. For HAVO, a modern foreign language (besides English) has to be added, and VWO students

also have to take Maths C, which is similar to Maths A, including solid geometry.

Children are obliged to attend school until the age of 16, or until they have a diploma for HAVO, VWO or MBO level 2, which is called a start qualification.

The Netherlands is among the world's top countries¹ for equality in educational opportunities. As a result, in the age group of 25- to 34-year-olds, 52% of men and 61% of women have a tertiary education qualification. This is significantly higher than the OECD averages of 41% for men and 54% for women.

2. What are the main pedagogical principles which guide this system, and what is its historical background?

The Netherlands counts around 1.4 million primary school children, and more than 936,000 secondary school students².

The vast majority of Dutch pupils attend government-funded schools, while less than 1% of them go to one of the few private (fee-paying) Dutch schools³.

Many of the private schools in the Netherlands are international schools, where they teach in English, or another foreign language. A couple of international schools are partly subsidised by the Dutch government, which is unique in the world.

Core objectives

Spread out over the country, there are more than 6,500 primary and 641 secondary schools. Most primary schools have between 200 and 500 pupils, while the secondary schools are usually bigger – between 1,000 and

¹The Netherlands is among the world's top countries for equality in educational opportunities. Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/15a32e93-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/15a32e93-en#:~:text=The%20Netherlands%20is%20one%20of,for%20successful%20labour%20market%20participation (English).

²There are 1.4 million primary school children and more than 936,000 secondary school students in the Netherlands. Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/83295NED/table?ts=1634226508403> and <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/85380NED/table?ts=1696080326185> (Dutch).

³Less than 1% of Dutch pupils go to one of the few private (fee-paying) Dutch schools Source: organization for private education in the Netherlands, www.particulieronderwijsnederland.nl (Dutch).

2,000 students⁴.

All these schools are supervised by the school inspection service⁵, which monitors the quality of education, and they have to adhere to the core objectives or attainment targets⁶ set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW)⁷. These core objectives define the contents of the education, and the level of knowledge and skills the children have to obtain during their school careers. All government-funded schools also need to take part in the aforementioned transition test (primary schools) and final exams (secondary schools).

Individual schools have a lot of freedom to fill in the details of the curriculum and budget allocation. Many schools are based on an educational philosophy, religion or concept. As a result, no two schools are the same.

Equalisation of public financing for religious and philosophy-based schools

Since 1917, at the end of a heated, political school struggle⁸, which lasted for over 100 years, schools following particular religious or pedagogic principles have had equal state funding as public schools. This debate about school funding also contributed to the eventual pillarisation of Dutch society: the vertical separation of citizens into groups by religion and associated political beliefs. Apart from non-denominational, Catholic and Protestant schools, members of each pillar also founded their own universities, newspapers, broadcasting organisations, political parties, and even banks, stores, hospitals and sports clubs. Some of these examples are still around today.

(Voluntary) parental contribution

Alongside government funding, parents are asked to contribute a voluntary amount that varies from school to school (usually below € 100 per year for primary school,

and between € 200 and € 400 for secondary). With this money, the school pays for extra things like excursions, school trips, art materials, additional music, dance or language classes, and an annual sports day. It is common that the *bijzondere* schools ask for a slightly higher parental contribution than the *openbare* schools. And there are more differences between the two:

Openbare (public) schools

Public (*openbare*) schools are funded by the government and run by an independent foundation originally set up by the government. They are always non-religious, but may follow a particular philosophy, e.g. Montessori, Waldorf, Dalton or Jenaplan.

Bijzondere (special) schools

About two-thirds of all primary pupils attend a *bijzondere* school. These schools have their own board, which usually consists of parents, or an independent organization to which multiple schools of the same orientation belong. These special schools often follow particular pedagogic principles, as mentioned above, or are based on a religion or belief system, like Catholicism, Protestantism, Evangelicalism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism or humanism. Nowadays, most religious schools are pretty mild in terms of religion, and parents do not need to be religious to send their children there.

Montessori

The Montessori system was named after its founder, the Italian doctor and educational specialist Maria Montessori, who lived from 1870 to 1952. Maria Montessori spent the last years of her life in the Netherlands and helped to start up the first Montessori schools here. There are currently more than 160 Montessori primary schools and 20 secondary schools in the Netherlands, many of which are located in Amsterdam.

Montessori schools emphasize independence, freedom within limits, taking responsibility and respect. They usually combine three age groups in one class to encourage learning together with and from each other. The teacher provides an environment of activities and materials which the pupils use at their own pace. Their motto is “Help me to do it myself”. Some of the Montessori schools have religious roots.

Waldorf

Waldorf schools (*Vrijescholen* in Dutch) follow the educational philosophy of Rudolph Steiner, who lived from 1861 to 1925 in Austria, and who you may also know as

⁴ Number of and average sizes of primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands. Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), <https://opendata.cbs.nl/statline/#/CBS/nl/dataset/03753/table?ts=1696081270893> (Dutch).

⁵ Website of the Dutch school inspection service (*Onderwijsinspectie*), www.onderwijsinspectie.nl (Dutch).

⁶ Overview of the core objectives or attainment targets of Dutch schools, as set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), www.slo.nl/sectoren/po/kerndoelen (Dutch).

⁷ English version of the website of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW): www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-education-culture-and-science

⁸ Since the political school struggle (*schoolstrijd*), schools following particular religious or pedagogic principles have had equal state funding as public schools. Source: <https://geschiedenis.nl/nieuws/artikel/3366/de-schoolstrijd-in-nederland> (Dutch).

the founder of anthroposophy.

Waldorf education puts a strong focus on nature. They celebrate the change of seasons, often with the entire school community – including the parents – and they regularly work with natural materials like wool, wood and felt. Next to using a limited number of workbooks, the teachers like to teach through poems, recitals, arts & crafts, music, theatre, fairy tales, fables and stories that are often based on mythology.

With currently 124 schools (94 primary plus 30 secondary), Waldorf is the fastest-growing school type in the Netherlands, and in 2023, they celebrated their 100th anniversary.

Dalton

The Dalton Plan is an educational concept created by the American teacher Helen Parkhurst, who lived from 1887 to 1973. The Netherlands has always been the country with the highest density of Dalton schools in the world. About 5% of all Dutch schools are based on the Dalton philosophy, which makes them the best-represented type of education.

The five core values of Dalton education are: Working together, Freedom of choice vs. responsibility, Efficiency, Independence and Reflection. The pupils learn to make their own realistic plans and schedules, and to work in groups on projects around a specific theme.

Jenaplan

Lastly, in Jenaplan schools, the community plays an important role, and they combine three age groups in one class to more realistically resemble a family setting or our society. The pupils learn a lot of things about different people, countries and cultures around the world, and they take part in many activities and celebrations together as a group.

There are 184 Jenaplan primary schools and 5 secondary schools which have a Jenaplan department in the Netherlands. About half of these Jenaplan schools have been established as a religious school.

Special needs schools

The above-mentioned special (*bijzondere*) schools are not to be confused with special needs schools, which cater to pupils with more severe learning problems. The national “Appropriate Education” policy⁹ is designed to

enable as many children with minor learning difficulties as possible to be educated in mainstream schools. If the support required turns out to be too specialized or intensive, the child will be referred to a dedicated special needs school.

There are four types of special needs schools, each catering to the specific needs of their pupils. The class sizes here are smaller than in regular schools, and the children receive more tailored, specialised support and therapies, focused on their specific needs. The teachers teach at different levels in the class, and most children follow the regular curriculum. It is also possible to transition to a regular school after a few years of special needs education.

Education for gifted children

Some other pupils are more advanced and need more challenges. To a certain extent, the regular schools can offer these pupils more challenging work within the structure of the classroom. They commonly also offer a “plus class” for a few hours per week, where advanced learners of different classes meet each other to work on more challenging projects.

Some municipalities have created a city-wide programme, in which children of different schools work together for one day per week on challenging tasks. This means that they have to finish their regular programme in four days, which also adds to the challenge.

Newcomer class

The last type of school that is worth highlighting is the newcomer class¹⁰ for non-Dutch speaking children aged 6+. These are dedicated schools for newcomers, or a newcomer class within a regular school.

All pupils get a personal programme, taught by a specialist teacher in a small class of 15-16 pupils. The programme takes on average one year – depending on pupils’ progress. Once the pupils are fully prepared and really confident speaking Dutch, they transfer to a regular school. Usually they do not “lose” a year.

3. Can you describe the current process to become teachers and which kind of compulsory or optional training they receive, especially regarding the relational and educational aspects of their profession?

Teachers are employed by the schools, and their salaries are paid by the school boards, which receive funding

⁹ The national “Appropriate Education” policy is designed to enable as many children with minor learning difficulties as possible to be educated in mainstream schools. Source: Website of the Dutch government: www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/passend-onderwijs (Dutch).

¹⁰ Primary and secondary schools for newcomer pupils in the Netherlands. Source: www.lowan.nl (Dutch).

from the Ministry of Education. Teachers have individual work contracts that include specific arrangements, and they may choose the school they want to work for, and change jobs whenever they want. They are not limited to one specific type of school, or a geographical region.

Teacher training school

There are multiple pathways to becoming a qualified teacher, with the teacher training school at a university of applied sciences being the most common route.

To become a teacher in primary school, students must attend a teacher training school known as PABO¹¹. On the other hand, if they aspire to teach at a secondary school, they need to follow a minor in Education, combined with a specialisation in their subject of interest.

It is important to note that there are two levels of qualification for secondary school teachers: first level and second level. First-level qualified teachers are authorised to teach all classes at all levels, whereas second-level degree teachers can only instruct the lower classes in HAVO and VWO, and all classes of VMBO.

To become a second-level qualified teacher, individuals are required to successfully complete their bachelor's studies. On the other hand, first-level degree teachers must obtain a master's degree to fulfil the necessary requirements.

The teacher training programme spans four years. For each year, part of the studies involves practical work in schools, by means of internships, under the supervision of a qualified teacher. After a student graduates, the school that has trained them usually tries to keep them.

Another option is to study PABO at a research university, which also takes four years. Upon completion of this trajectory, trainee teachers will receive two diplomas: a bachelor's degree for teaching at a primary school from a university of applied sciences, and a bachelor's degree in Educational Sciences or Pedagogy from the research university.

It is also possible to do a bachelor's degree at a university of applied sciences, followed by a master's degree at a research university – whichever route suits the prospective teacher best.

The tuition fees for both types of universities are € 2,314 per year for a full-time course. First year students pay half price, and students who are training to become teachers pay half price for their second year too.

¹¹ Via the PABO, one can become a Dutch primary school teacher. Source: Website of the Dutch government: www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/werken-in-het-onderwijs/vraag-en-antwoord/leraar-basisonderwijs (Dutch).

Side-streaming

In recent years, a more common route to becoming a teacher is through a process called side-streaming¹². This is about individuals who have already graduated in a different field, and have gained some work experience in this field. To begin the side-streaming process, they must go through a selection procedure to establish that they will be able to graduate within two years. From day 1, the side-streamer will make a salary, which will be paid for by the school that hires them. This also applies to the teacher's tuition fees. The school may request a subsidy from the government to cover part of the costs.

Hybrid and guest teachers

Some individuals choose to be hybrid teachers, meaning that they combine their teaching job with another profession. They teach part-time and utilise their work experience in the classroom environment. These teachers need to be fully qualified, too.

Finally, secondary schools also have the option to hire guest teachers, who usually teach around a specific theme for a maximum of six hours per week. Guest teachers do not need to be qualified teachers, but they must be supervised by a certified educator, and they need to prove that they have no criminal record. If they want to work more, they will have to enrol at the teacher training school.

Teacher shortage

The government and municipalities have been actively advocating for the use of side-streamers and hybrid and guest teachers as a partial solution to the teacher shortage, which is currently one of the biggest challenges in the field of education¹³.

At primary school level, there is a national shortage of 9,700 full-time teachers, while in secondary schools, the shortage is 2,177 FTEs. These shortages are especially prevalent in the bigger cities, and at schools with a less privileged population.

There are a number of reasons for the teacher shortage. Firstly, there are a high number of retirees, who are leaving the profession. Secondly, many teachers choose to work part-time.

Thirdly, it sometimes proves difficult to retain teachers.

¹² Side-streaming, an alternative way to becoming a teacher. Source: Website of the Dutch government: www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/werken-in-het-onderwijs/vraag-en-antwoord/hoe-word-ik-zijinstromer-in-het-onderwijs (Dutch).

¹³ The teacher shortage is currently one of the biggest challenges in the field of education. Source: Website of the Dutch government: www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/werken-in-het-onderwijs/aanpak-tekort-aan-leraren (Dutch).

They suffer from too much pressure and responsibility, too many (admin) tasks besides teaching, and demanding and sometimes even aggressive parents. Especially some starting teachers miss experienced professionals to guide them sufficiently. This all leads to around one third of teachers leaving the profession within the first five years, many of whom are younger than 30.

Special attention

Furthermore, the growing number of students requiring special attention in classrooms poses additional challenges for teachers. Since 2014, when the Inclusive Education Act took effect, all schools have been responsible for providing a suitable learning place for every child¹⁴. If the support required turns out to be too specialised or intensive, the child will be referred to a dedicated special needs school. But in all other cases, the class teacher is responsible for supporting these children in the regular class, possibly paired with a few hours of external help. Moreover, because of the growing streams of immigrants, expats, asylum seekers, reunited families and refugees, many children in Dutch schools are not native Dutch speakers, especially in the bigger cities in the Randstad area, in the west of the country¹⁵. New research shows that, when it comes to children aged 15 or younger in Amsterdam, just one third have two Dutch parents¹⁶. For children with foreign parents, their main source of exposure to Dutch is school, and their parents cannot help them much with their schoolwork. The above-mentioned newcomer classes are good ways to help these children learn the language and integrate, but they often still need additional support in their regular school afterwards.

Although most teachers are very willing, these developments have put a lot of extra pressure on their shoulders. All these difficulties were intensified during the pandemic and many students are still trying to catch up.

One of the visible consequences of the aforementioned challenges is that the level of (comprehensive) reading

among Dutch 15-year-olds is declining, as shown by the OECD/PISA¹⁷ international rankings for schools. Although they still score among the top countries, especially in the areas of maths and science, their reading level is lagging behind some of their OECD counterparts.

Improvements

The government, municipalities and school boards have put various measures in place to attract and retain more teachers. Some initiatives include providing priority housing for teachers in larger cities where the housing prices are high, and higher bonuses for working in schools with pupils who have a higher risk of learning delays.

Another way to alleviate pressure on teachers is to hire specialised staff for subjects such as physical education, music, arts and crafts, and drama, as well as caretakers/janitors, admin staff, specialised teachers for Dutch as an additional language, and care coordinators.

Schools get extra money for pupils who risk being delayed in their learning due to learning difficulties, or unfavourable family situations¹⁸. After the school lockdowns, the government invested additional money to help the schools catch up, and to battle inequality of opportunity. Schools with a high number of pupils from underprivileged families got additional bonuses through this fund. Moreover, after a couple of teacher strikes, the salaries of primary teachers have been equalised with those of secondary teachers.

Currently, on average, teachers in the Netherlands earn around € 5,800 gross per month for a full-time position¹⁹, which is significantly higher than the national average salary of € 3,500 per month²⁰, and also higher than teachers' salaries in most other European countries.

A teacher can increase their salary through further qualifications and specialisations, and with every year of work experience.

14 In 2014, the Inclusive Education Act took effect, through which all schools are responsible for providing a suitable learning place for every child. Source: Website of the Dutch government, www.government.nl/topics/appropriate-education (English).

15 Many children in Dutch schools are not native Dutch speakers, especially in the bigger cities in the west of the country. Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), www.cbs.nl/en-gb/dossier/asylum-migration-and-integration/how-many-residents-have-a-foreign-country-of-origin- (English).

16 Of all children aged 15 or younger in Amsterdam, just one third have two Dutch parents. Source: https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/amsterdam-population?fbclid=IwAR2xCBfCX92JmIK-8SF3XR4qf4okhY0HlcMUe71jAjMF5VJeX29_yEXtSop4 (English).

17 PISA rankings (Programme for International Student Assessment) – Results 2018. Source: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), www.oecd.org/pisa/publications/PISA2018_CN_NLD.pdf (English).

18 Schools get extra money for pupils who risk being delayed in their learning due to learning difficulties, or unfavourable family situations. Source: Website of the Dutch government, www.government.nl/topics/language-disadvantage (English).

19 Overview of the teacher salaries in primary education. Source: Website of the Dutch government, www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/werken-in-het-onderwijs/vraag-en-antwoord/wat-verdien-ik-als-leraar-in-het-basisonderwijs (Dutch).

20 Almost half of the 9.3 million citizens aged between 15 and 75 who had a paid job worked part-time. Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), <https://longreads.cbs.nl/nederland-in-cijfers-2022/wie-werken-het-vaakst-in-deeltijd> (Dutch).

Still, teaching often has the reputation of being a low-paid job that enjoys little respect. Although a lot of things have improved over the years, it has proven hard to turn this reputation around, and to attract enough new professionals. The biggest advantage of being a teacher that a lot of people mention is the long holidays they enjoy – 12 weeks per year, of which six weeks are for the summer holidays, with the other six spread out over the year.

4. Evaluation is a complex and delicate aspect of the educational process. How is it addressed in The Netherlands? By whom, and according to what criteria, are the students and their skills evaluated throughout the school career?

The schools write their curriculum to cover all the above-mentioned core objectives or attainment targets set by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. The schools may choose which books, materials and activities they find most suitable according to their philosophy or approach. School textbook publishers compile and publish textbook sets that are guaranteed to cover all required learning goals. School textbooks for primary and secondary schools are free for students, as are most supplies and additional materials in primary schools.

The schools may decide in which order they teach the lessons, which additional materials they use, and how many and which types of tests they give.

It is common that the pupils are tested after every chapter of the textbook their teacher uses, to check whether they have understood everything.

Standardised tests

From the 3rd year of primary school, next to the school's "chapter tests", the pupils take a standardised test twice per year to see how they score against the national average. These tests are also used to see where the child may need additional support or more challenging work, and for teachers to check whether they have explained everything well, and where they will need to focus on in the near future. Pupils are not made to repeat or skip a year based on these test results alone.

The aforementioned transition test at the end of primary school is also a standardised test.

Grading

In primary school, the pupils are often graded from "very insufficient" to "excellent", combined with suggestions of what they still need to work on.

In most secondary schools and some primary schools, the teachers grade their tests and exams with a mark from 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), to one decimal point. A 5.5 is the minimum pass grade, which is called a *voldoende*.

The teachers decide how to grade each test individually, depending on the level of difficulty of the assignment and the importance of the topics at hand. Unlike in some other countries, in the Netherlands, the mark is unrelated to the percentage of correct answers given.

It is also common that a bigger assignment gets more weight than a short verbal test, with the obtained grade for an assignment, for example, counting 3 times, and the verbal test only once.

A 10 is only awarded when a student has answered every single question perfectly, which rarely happens with open-ended questions. An 8 is considered a good score, but you'll find many students being equally happy with a 5.5.

Core subjects

Secondary schools make a distinction between core subjects and other subjects. The core subjects are Dutch, English and Maths. For a pass, a student may get a 5 for one of the core subjects, provided they can compensate with higher grades for the other subjects. The schools establish the rest of the pass grades themselves, often meaning that students can have one or two insufficient grades for non-core subjects.

Some students find themselves in a grey area, where they are just a few decimal points short of passing the year. In these cases, the subject teachers will schedule a meeting and discuss whether they think the student would be capable of doing well in the year above. During this meeting, they also look at things like the student's personal circumstances, attitude to learning, behaviour in class, and how they completed their homework. If the student does not succeed, they will have to repeat the year, or move to a lower stream.

Graduation

In the last year of their secondary school career, students have to take several tests and practical assignments for each chosen subject. The teachers create these school exams, which count for 50% of the students' final grade. The other half consists of the national exams, which are the same for every school of the same level in the country, and are held at exactly the same time.

Students graduate from secondary school if they have an average of 6 for all their exam subjects combined. Also here they are allowed to get a few insufficient gra-

des, if they can compensate with higher grades for other subjects. They may retake one exam to try to raise their average, and then pass.

In most cases, university admissions require a relevant secondary school diploma, with the right subject profile, and put little significance on the list of grades.

5. Choose three of these topics that you consider highly significant for the school system of The Netherlands, and briefly describe them:

1) Individual capabilities

Levels of education

As discussed above, there are a couple of different types and streams of education to accommodate every child's needs and interests as much as possible. The end goal is that every student gets a valuable diploma with which they can easily find a suitable job.

Differentiation

It is common for teachers to differentiate in class, meaning the students do not need to wait for each other. Students who already understand the subject matter may work independently, so that the remaining students can ask for additional instructions.

Special needs and newcomer schools

Of course, the special needs schools and newcomer classes also cater to the needs and capabilities of the students. The downside of these schools is segregation, while the biggest benefit is that these pupils receive much more attention from specialised teachers in a small classroom, which they would not have received in a regular school.

2) Digital innovation

These days, a school without digital devices is almost unthinkable. Only some Waldorf schools still try and avoid all digital devices.

Instead of a blackboard with chalk, teachers nowadays use what is called a digiboard, a sort of big touchscreen that is hung on the wall of the classroom, on which they can show things to illustrate their lessons, or display assignments. It is also common for each primary classroom to have a couple of PCs and/or iPads on which the children work on adaptive exercises, which get more difficult if they make few mistakes, and offer more repetition if the child has not mastered the materials yet.

Usually, secondary students bring a laptop or Chromebook to school every day. Most secondary schools use

a combination of workbooks on paper and digital textbooks, while some secondary schools make more use of digital devices than schoolbooks. Some parents and students see a lot of benefits of the latter, while others are concerned about the long-term effects on the students' eyesight, posture and concentration.

An increasing number of schools have introduced the subject of digital literacy and digital awareness, through which they not only teach their students how to type and navigate the internet, but also warn them about cyber bullying, internet/smartphone/social media addiction, cyber security and online privacy. Some schools have included programming and robotics in their curriculum, through which students develop their problem-solving and strategic-thinking skills.

Nowadays, teachers' jobs have become slightly easier since they are able to use computers to analyse the results of their pupils, and catch anything that is out of line and needs attention more quickly.

Secondary school students can view their homework and test results in a school app, for which their parents also have an account. This program also automatically calculates the average grades, so they can keep track of their progress and their chances of passing the year.

There are also some digital solutions for children with special needs, for example, a computer program which reads texts aloud for children who have dyslexia, or a special microphone which captures the voice of the teacher and transfers it remotely to the hearing aids of children who are hearing impaired.

3) Relationship with families

Educational partnership and parental involvement

Most schools heavily rely on parental support for practical things like accompanying the class on a school trip, or reading with a small group, but also to promote the academic and social development of their children. Educating children is often seen as a joint responsibility of schools and parents. Schools organise regular formal and informal events to get the parents involved, and to increase cohesion.

Report meetings

It is common to have a "starter conversation" at the beginning of the school year with the parents, teacher and pupil. During this meeting, the three parties talk about the learning goals of the coming year, what went well last year and what needs to be improved, and the differences between the behaviour of the child at school and at home. Twice per year, the pupils get a progress report, which is

followed by a meeting with the parents.

It is also common that a couple of times per week, the parents may come into their child's classroom for 15 minutes to briefly talk with the teacher, and to see what they have been working on. It is necessary to make an appointment when the parents or teacher want to discuss about bigger things.

At the end of a project or theme, the parents are often invited for a celebration, to look at the pupils' art works displayed as an exhibition, or to watch a music performance. These are also nice ways to meet other parents. Coffee mornings and themed evenings are other common and easy-to-organise ways to get the parents involved.

Communication

Usually, communication with the parents takes place via a portal and a (bi)weekly online newsletter. Most schools work with two "class parents" per class, who represent the other parents. They have more intensive contact with the teacher, and inform the other parents accordingly, usually by means of a parents' WhatsApp group. They also help arrange parents for special activities or events. Additionally, the class parents organise social events for the parents, like drinks in the evening, or a picnic with the parents and children at the end of the school year. It is also common that in the week before Christmas, the children have dinner in their classroom with home-cooked dishes, while their parents are outside having a drink and some snacks.

Especially the younger children often have playdates at each other's houses. This is also a nice way for parents to get to know the parents of their children's friends.

Parent Council and Participation Council

Every school is required to have a (volunteer) Parent Council and a Participation Council. The Parent Council meets a couple of times per year with two or three members of staff. They organize school-wide activities and festivities, collect the voluntary parental contribution, and then spend it on extra things that are not funded by the government. The Participation Council also consists of both parents and staff members, who have to be elected. At secondary schools, some students are members of this council too. The Participation Council discusses topics related to the school's official policies, and it has to check that the school operates in a transparent, fair and open way.

6. In the end, what do you think are the strengths and the weaknesses of the school system in The Netherlands?

Freedom of school choice

In my opinion, one of the biggest strengths of the school system in the Netherlands is that parents have a lot of choice. They may choose a school that appeals to them in terms of philosophy, religion, learning style, focus areas and atmosphere. This freedom of school choice is very important for many parents.

Likewise, the schools have the freedom to use the books and materials that suit their approach, and the teachers often use different teaching styles to offer a variety of lessons and try and make learning fun and suited to their population.

A downside of this freedom of school choice is that some schools overrepresent minority groups in society. At these schools, there are often fewer children who speak Dutch at home, fewer parents who have enjoyed higher education, and the families have social and/or financial problems more often than the average. These schools get more funding from the government to compensate, and since many more skills are asked from their teachers, they are rewarded with bigger bonuses with the hope of retaining them.

Child-led

Another positive point is that, in general, the education is very child-led, especially with the younger children. The pupils learn to become independent, and enjoy a certain amount of freedom, autonomy and ownership over their learning. There is usually no homework until the end of primary school. Children get the chance to develop at their own pace, and there is little pressure to outperform their peers.

The idea behind the different streams in secondary school is that everyone follows their education at their own level, and they all get a feeling of success with a type of education that matches their capabilities and interests. Unlike in some other countries, there are many options for a solid vocational education in the Netherlands, concluded by a valuable diploma and good job prospects. Since there is no stigma around repeating the year, and it is common to move up from one level to the next, the system also caters for late bloomers.

It requires a lot of dedication and focus to move up to a higher level, and for some children, the streaming at age 12 comes too early. Some feel a hit to their self-esteem when they get a lower recommendation than anticipa-

ted, and they stop doing their best in school, which may mean a lot of lost potential.

Financial

The third important positive aspect to highlight is that almost all schools are funded by the government, including universities and higher education, so studying at a decent school does not depend on parental income. In theory, all children have equal opportunities to climb the social ladder.

Of course, more wealthy parents can afford more additional (homework) support and materials for their children, and the consequences of the school lockdowns during the pandemic are more visible at schools that children from less privileged families attend. So, some discrepancies still exist.

Part-time employment

In the Netherlands, it is very common to have a part-time job. In 2021, almost half of the 9.3 million citizens aged between 15 and 75 who had a paid job worked part-time. This allows the workers to take care of their families, follow a (part-time) course, pursue other interests, and to have a healthy work/life balance. In schools, 59% of staff are part-time, which is an overrepresentation. This also has to do with the discrepancy between male and female teachers, especially in primary schools, where only 13% are male²¹. Although it is also common among men to work part-time, in practice most part-time workers are female. With attractive secondary employment conditions, many schools try and convince their part-time working teachers to add a few more hours in an attempt to reduce the teacher shortage.

In conclusion, although many things are going well in Dutch schools, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

²¹ In Dutch primary schools, only 13% of the teachers are male. Source: Website of the Dutch government, www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2021/12/09/trendrapportage-arbeidsmarkt-leraren-po-vo-en-mbo-2021 (Dutch).