SCHOOLS MAKE A DIFFERENCE ……….BUT EACH DIFFERENCE IS DIFFERENT

On Dutch schools and educational equality: trends and challenges

Frans J.G. Janssens
Netherlands’ Education Inspectorate, Utrecht

&

Frans L. Leeuw
Netherlands Education Inspectorate

&

University of Utrecht, Dept of Sociology, Utrecht.

Dr Frans J.G. Janssens (1952) is an educational psychologist, Ph.D. University of Groningen and currently coordinating inspector of schools with the Netherlands’ Education Inspectorate. He specializes in evaluation methodology, accountability systems and urban education.

Frans L. Leeuw (1953) is a sociologist, Ph.D. University of Leyden and currently chief inspector for a.o. higher education, knowledge management and evaluation studies at the Netherlands Education Inspectorate, Utrecht. Since 1991 he is a professor at Utrecht University, Department of Sociology. Earlier he was affiliated with the Netherlands Open University, the Netherlands General Accounting Office, Leyden University and Utrecht University. He is President of the European Evaluation Society.

Address all correspondence to: Dr. Frans J.G.Janssens, PO Box 2730, NL3500 GS Utrecht. The Netherlands. E-mail: F.Janssens@owinsp.nl.
INTRODUCTION

Variety in education is a high priority in the Netherlands. The Dutch government encourages variety in all layers of education. In this article, we shall restrict our comments primarily to compulsory education: primary and secondary education. We interpret variety as being the objective of attuning education at a school to the wishes of a certain target group, such as:

- the parents (e.g. an office hours school);
- a certain type of pupil (e.g. highly gifted);
- a course which fulfils a need (e.g. bilingual education);
- the conditions according to which education is provided (e.g. a homework-free school).

Variety leads to differences within schools of the same type. We are concerned with differences in the quality of the education provided, the education process and/or the way in which education is organised due to schools experiencing the prevailing statutory framework as constricitive or limiting.

That schools differ is a fact, but that these differences appear to become larger and larger and that variety is being encouraged more and more is a new phenomenon. In order to understand what this means within its context, in this article we will first give some attention to recent developments in the Dutch school system.

In this article, we will continue examining several dimensions of the concept of ‘variety in education’, why is it important and what possible (unintended) side-effects are for Dutch schools, pupils and educational quality. Next, we will also attempt to arrive at a consequence analysis of the question: What are the consequences of (more) differences between schools for social cohesion in Dutch society? The examination will cover how schools devote attention to social cohesion and what differences exist between schools.

The Dutch school system

A first core element of the Dutch school system which goes back to the early 1900’s is ‘the equal funding of public and private schools; this is accompanied by legislation requiring schools to meet a number of input- and process characteristics. Thus, subsidies have allowed the private sector to expand but they have also led to regulation, thereby in fact making the private sector 'quasi-governmental' and interwoven in the comprehensive bureaucracy of the government and intermediary associations of governing boards, teacher unions and the like.

But this is only part of the story, according to De Vijlder (2001). Until about the 1970s parents saw the concept of ‘freedom of choice’ rarely or not at all in its contemporary sense of ‘consumer choice’. It was simply assumed by everyone that children would attend the school that matched their parents' religious beliefs. Education provision and participation was therefore segregated along denominational lines. Parents followed the morals and habits of the leaders of the religious groups they belonged to and they believed it was the only right way.

An initial advantage of this system has been that it generated an integration rather than a segregation of social classes: Catholic children from the lower strata went to the same schools as Catholic elite children, as was the case for the other denominations (Bronneman-Helmers, 1999). But at the same time, the picture sketched thus far resulted in a situation wherein schools have not been interrogated on their results every now and then: a silent invitation to choose for the route of least resistance.
In the Netherlands, the problem of achieving an equitable system of school finance appears to have found a satisfactory solution in that most of the resources are not being allocated to schools with children from prosperous families, but to schools attended by children from poorer families. However, after a number of years it was observed that schools awarded extra funding by the national administration for children from underprivileged groups appeared to use these extra resources mainly to reduce the size of classes. They rarely made a special effort (other than simply reducing class size) to meet the goal for which the extra funding was granted, namely special attention for disadvantaged children. Apart from the rare exceptions, this suggests again an expression of choosing the road of least resistance. It is more than once suggested that one of the main reasons for this situation is a lack of transparency and information: parents just don’t know how much the government invests (in fact: tries to invest) in their children and thus they are not triggered to require that the school gives their child the attention it deserves.

The combination of a strong secularisation of Dutch society, the decline of students after the baby boom (and concomitant cost disease and planning inertia symptoms) and the influx of large numbers of immigrants - especially in the inner cities of the country's largest municipalities - have created a mismatch between the denomination of schools and their actual population, e.g. a majority of immigrant children in a Catholic school. At the same time these processes increased the social segregation in Dutch schools, as children form disadvantaged immigrant groups concentrated in inner-city schools. Thus, the established schools with an established teaching staff could continue to exist under very different circumstances without adapting and innovating fundamentally, although they had wide freedom to do so and there was a big need to do so. This observation reflects the more general problem of a lack of real incentives to innovate curricula and to pay attention to the unique characteristics and needs of students. At the same time all parties involved simply showed a lack of attention for real and testable results.

Recent developments
During the 1990's and especially under the new Government since 1998 a number of new developments and insights became visible (De Vijlder, 2001). Bronneman-Helmers (2000) expects increasing tendencies toward demand-orientation in education-arrangements. Self-aware, well-educated parents organise their lives as they see fit, feel the availability of alternatives to traditionally organised services. They want to educate their children in ways that are not met by the conventional current schools. There is an increasing pressure to meet these individual needs of parents in many ways. Parents want the best for their children and they perceive a disparity between what schools can offer on the one hand and on the other: (1) what is technically possible and (2) the "glossy" rich learning environment outside schools. This puts a pressure on schools, although they are currently not well equipped to meet these new requirements (Bronneman-Helmers, 1999). However, the debate expresses the feeling that parents and students should no longer be satisfied with just ‘good education’ and that the quality ought to be raised to a level meeting the standards of the knowledge economy of the 21st century and this is a general feeling among the public and among thought leaders in Dutch society as well.

As a matter of fact the government has generated a number of policy initiatives. They state that effective responses to developments must come mainly from the schools themselves. These need elbowroom, autonomy, and a demand-driven attitude: elbowroom to respond to
developments; autonomy to do so effectively from a position of strength; and a demand-driven attitude to meet real social needs. Above all, they must be able to respond to developments fast and flexibly. They should be able to deliver tailored solutions and real quality. Deregulation, autonomy, strong management and competent personnel are the basic ingredients to attain these goals. Moreover, the flipside of autonomy, of course, is that the institutions must be accountable. They have a duty to explain to students, parents, and the government how they intend to deliver quality. And they have to be held accountable for their results. It has to ensure that high-quality education is available to both young and old, that everyone has opportunities, and that the conditions are in place to enable the system to deliver quality. It has to ensure proper co-ordination within the system. And it has to create the right strategic conditions for stakeholders to work together to produce the necessary solutions: parents with schools, employers with employees, head teachers with school governing bodies, and municipalities with direct and indirect stakeholders at local level.

VARIETY AS AN ISSUE

Schools are starting to differ

Dutch education policy during the last century was characterised by considerable and detailed regulations and strong central control. At the end of the Seventies and the start of the Eighties, ideas on administration and policy in relation to education started to change. Since the mid-Nineties, schools are no longer regarded exclusively by the government as task-oriented organisations that provide education and that are answerable in this respect to the government but also as (market) organisations which have to account for their methods of working and results to their customers, principally parents and pupils. Schools are therefore becoming increasingly able to create individual profiles vis-à-vis other schools. According to some Dutch scientists (e.g. Bronneman-Helmers, 1999), the Dutch Education Council (Onderwijsraad, 2000) and our current Minister, this is the reason for increased variety in education and will result in an improved coordination with the interests, preferences and needs of parents and pupils with regard to a certain quality of education.

Each difference is different

In recent years, the differences between schools have increased due to the effect of educational developments, changing control philosophy and social change. However there are differences in sorts and sizes. For example, differences have arisen in the financial possibilities open to schools due to the effects of parental contributions and sponsorship. Moreover, differences between schools have arisen in relation to educational content. Schools are presenting images of themselves that are increasingly aimed at certain target groups. Examples are magnet schools, broad-based schools, office hours schools, schools offering bilingual education and schools for budding elite sports people.

There are also differences between schools in terms of pupil populations. Until well into the Sixties, the choice of schools was predominantly determined by denomination. During recent years, the make-up of school populations has been determined primarily by social factors. Approximately one-third of schools have mixed school populations in which no specific social group is dominant. Other schools are dominated to a certain extent by particular social groups.
Extreme examples are schools attended almost exclusively by the children of highly qualified parents of Dutch origin as opposed to schools with almost exclusively pupils from poorly educated parents of immigrant origins (Bronneman-Helmers, 1999, p. 65). People tend to refer to these schools in everyday terms as white and black schools. Differences in pupil population result in a very wide range of educational results (Tesser, Merens & Van Praag, 1999).

Lastly, there are differences in quality between schools. Data from the Inspectorate of Education (2000) show that sound education is provided at around 30% of schools. That means that, irrespective of the differences, the learning outcomes comply at least with the regulations of the government and that the other aspects relating to the quality of education are at least of a satisfactory level, like the school climate, teaching, assessment and quality care. At well over 60% of schools, the critical quality characteristics are not all achieved to an acceptable level, although the Inspectorate is not unduly worried about the differences. These differences fit to the level of growth of these schools and can be easily improved without any external help (Inspectorate of Education, 2001). However, at around 5% of schools for primary and secondary education both the learning outcomes and the other critical aspects can be regarded as extremely worrying (see Inspectorate of Education, 2001). These very weak schools are not exclusively, but quite often, schools with a large number of pupils from poorly educated, generally immigrant parents. In itself, this is a worrying development because there is a risk of an underclass of schools emerging at which pupil achievements are considerably lower than what we might expect.

Not all differences are good

There is therefore a drawback to increased autonomy. Individual schools can decide not to offer socially relevant, but financially unattractive courses. Schools are also free to use methods of working and teaching formats with regard to which it has not (yet) been scientifically proven that these are equally effective for all pupils (see e.g. Chall, 2000). On the other hand, schools may start offering fashionable courses based on market forces and this might lead to a possible imbalance in supply and demand.

There are certain risks associated with variety. There is considerable tension between requirements and expectations, the available resources and capacities on the one hand and the realisation of good education on the other. These tensions can, after all, result in what we refer to as undesirable variety or variety based on powerlessness or poverty. Schools can choose to offer fewer courses, employ unqualified teachers, send classes home or introduce selective intake in order to make education more attractive to teachers.

OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Opportunities

Schools at which there is organised learning, and which have a strategic policy, monitor their quality permanently using, for example, a quality care system, but also on the basis of Inspectorate research. These schools are also continuously looking to innovate and adapt to new situations. They try to distinguish themselves on the basis of quality. More variety therefore offers education more opportunities.
This reasoning applies to developments in all social sectors, including education. What is central to the idea that variety is good for the quality of services and products (including education) is a theory on the importance of innovations in societies and the mechanisms on which these are based. The core of this theory harks back to the manner in which entrepreneurs (although it might be better to talk of ‘enterprising people and organisations’) deal with the issue of development and diffusion of innovations. The core of this theory was splendidly articulated in the first half of the last century by Schumpeter (1967).

**Variety and innovation**

Schumpeter's body of thought is based on innovation and progress being approximately equal to the encouragement of variation. The same Schumpeter also points out, however, that it was difficult to innovate - in the 19th and first half of the last century - because the issues in question fell outside the routine tasks that everyone understands and because resistance is brought to bear by the environment in many ways, which vary according to social circumstances (ibid., p.151).

Of course education administrators are not entrepreneurs with tasks as described by Schumpeter. Nevertheless, those in education can learn from Schumpeter. If we wish to modernise the product of ‘education’, ‘enterprising variety’ is a good point of departure. It is essential that education is modernised in order to ensure that good quality education can be provided in the future, even in a situation affected by market forces.

Schumpeter, and many researchers into innovation after him, also teaches that innovations are accompanied by the ‘collapse' and destruction of old technologies and structures. This is something we cannot allow to happen in education. Not only with a view to protecting pupils but also because education is aimed at ensuring continuity and has to be protected against innovations which are influenced by passing fads (see e.g. Chall, 2000 and Ravitch, 2000). This does not mean that the government has to act as a policeman with regard to educational innovation but it does mean that it has to determine frameworks within which schools themselves engage in innovative initiatives with help from others. That also begs the question of the extent to which the regulations developed by the authorities and the regulations that education institutions themselves have implemented (‘from the bottom up’) are in fact innovation-oriented and indeed prompt sensible innovation. The (old) antithesis between (central) regulations and the development of ‘pockets of innovation’ does not need to be an issue, however, as long as a government provides legislation and regulations which protect the basic values in education but at the same time encourage innovation.

**Threats**

Dutch advocates of variety argue that this is an instrument with which the quality of education can be improved. The reasoning often applied is that differences in quality are rewarded by parents and pupils, meaning that eventually the better schools survive (Bosker & Scheerens, 1999). Schools are becoming more autonomous, pursue their own policies and make maximum use of their scope for policymaking. Parents and pupils then choose the school that suits them best. The theory is that this leads to a growth of good schools while poorly functioning schools die off (see e.g. Fiske & Ladd, 2000). This analysis is open to discussion however.
In the first instance, there is a limited range of certain schools in the Netherlands. Denomination, the nature of the pupil population and the accessibility of the school are still important factors which determine the process of choosing a school. The quality of education and educational achievements are still of secondary importance (Bosker & Scheerens, 1999). An additional factor is that in some circumstances, the number of schools from which parents can reasonably choose is very limited. As far as secondary education is concerned, the majority of Dutch local authorities offer parents and pupils no alternative at all: there is often just one school to choose from (Bosker & Scheerens, 1999).

Secondly, the extent to which Dutch schools now utilise their scope for policymaking is still extremely limited (Bosker & Scheerens, 1999). This is because some schools implement so many regulations that there is no longer any free scope for policymaking (Education Council, 2000). Furthermore, senior figures in school management, the central management board, the school governing body or a school advisory service pursue policies for their schools which are oriented more towards uniformity. This renders differences between schools as small as possible, as borne out by Inspectorate observations. Moreover, increased autonomy does not always result in demonstrable improvements in quality (Education Council, 2000).

Thirdly, the question is whether, as a consequence of market forces, the good schools remain while the weak ones disappear. The issue is really whether pure market forces can be said to exist in education (see CPB, 2001). Education and schools cannot be compared to the business community and commercial companies. For example, the market works with ‘real’ money and is dominated by the balancing of price/achievement. This scarcely applies in compulsory education.

There is a growing group of pupils with considerable language and cognitive delays in combination with serious socio-emotional problems who cannot be placed, or catered for, at schools. Research into the quality of schools with a lot of risk pupils often produces reports stating that behavioural problems, conflict management and the upholding of discipline are important aspects of school reality (see e.g. Johnson & Asera, 1999). Schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils, which group includes a relatively large number of poorly functioning schools, quite often have to deal with these sorts of pupils (Carter, 2000; Janssens, 2001 and Thrupp, 1998). It is not out of the question that, in an educational system in which there is competition between schools, not all poorly functioning schools come off worst for the simple reason that the raison d'être of such schools is precisely to be found in catering for, and the supervision of, the category of pupils referred to (see Janssens, 2001). This phenomenon played a role in New Zealand where, as a consequence of an education policy that capitalised on competition between schools and the publication of quality data on schools, the best schools and the worst schools underwent unbridled expansion (See Fiske & Ladd, 2000).

There are, therefore, limits to variety. In Dutch education, variety is restricted by a number of different mechanisms. These include, for example, the influence on current education as well as on the possibilities for innovation of legislation and regulations, tests, exams, course books, courses and in-service training. In the case of educational innovation, the assumption is often that schools have control. However, in reality process managers, publishers, product developers, consultancies and the Inspectorate all have considerable influence on
developments (see Education Council, 2000). In this context, the influence of public opinion and of parents must not be underestimated. Parents have not only become more vocal but also more calculating due to the fact that more and more objective details are becoming available on schools, both in document and virtual forms (Janssens, 2001).

An additional phenomenon that can limit variety has been revealed by research into path-dependencies (c.f. David, 1985; see also Nelson, 1994 and the work of the economist-historian Douglas C. North, 1990). These come about when societies and organisations choose to follow a particular path of development, as a result of which the effect of new processes repeatedly appears to be aimed at ensuring that this path continues to exist. The same is also the case when processes and routes become available which are more efficient. Education is also subject to path-dependencies which contribute to an unnecessary limiting of variety. Properly documented examples can be found in research into the implementation of educational innovations (see e.g. Chall, 2000). A further example of path-dependence is the furnishing of school buildings which is subject to a unique dynamism which therefore sometimes has a rather limiting effect on the arrangement and organisation of educational innovations.

VARIETY AND SOCIAL COHESION

The concept of social cohesion is an expression of the fact that a society is more than a combination of individuals. Social cohesion comes about as a result of people respecting reciprocal standards, participating actively in organisations, and as a result of the trust they have in each other and in social institutions. Social cohesion is also referred to as the density of relations between individuals, groups and organisations in a society. The more intense the links, the more cohesion a society has.

In recent times, in the context of the Dutch political and social discussion, education has been expected to make (once again) a greater contribution to increasing social cohesion. In addition, the Council of Europe has placed social cohesion high on its agenda because a certain reticence has been observed with regard to the extent to which citizens in society function due to, among other things, feelings of insecurity and instability, the loss of trust in democracy and the growth of individualism in societies (Heydt, 1999).

The importance of social cohesion is also revealed in research. This points to the fact that societies that have greater social cohesion also experience greater economic growth. A number of different authors are of the opinion that education acts as a boost for more social cohesion and therefore for economic growth (Gradstein & Justman, 1999; Heydt, 1999; Ritzen, 2000). Heynemann (1998) distinguishes three paths along which this process develops. The first path involves education producing knowledge which is accessible to the public on ‘social contracts’ between people and organisations. The second path is characterised by education providing pupils with role models showing how they can interact on the basis of cooperation. If the third path is followed, education acts as a means of transferring knowledge on social contracts and the consequences of these being broken (c.f. Ritzen, 2000, p. 10-11).
How the contribution made by education to increasing social cohesion in society relates to the theme of this paper, namely the variety between schools, is not immediately clear however. On the one hand, there are arguments for, and studies on, the positive effects of variety between schools with regard to the connection between education and social cohesion while, on the other hand, there are arguments and studies which point to possible negative effects of variety for the relationship between education and social cohesion. It is for this reason that we want to unravel these relationships between variety in education and social cohesion a little more on the basis of three questions. This exercise, incidentally, could be regarded as the first step towards a consequence analysis (c.f. Becker, 1997; Portes, 2000).

Question 1:
If more differences arise between schools due to parents and pupils being offered increased freedom of choice (by e.g. vouchers) and if they also exploit this freedom, what are the consequences for social cohesion in a society?

This question is examined in American research reported on by Putnam (2000). He analyses the consequences of ‘choice programs’ in the US. If there is an effect on increasing quality, Putnam (2000, p. 304-305) is of the opinion that this is presumably based less on the ‘magic of the market place than on the magic of the social capital. School reform initiatives that encourage kids to attend smaller, more communal schools may have the unintended result of increasing both student and parental involvement in clubs, classroom activities, governing bodies, and education lobbying groups. In this way such education reform could be an engine of civic engagement.

Some empirical evidence on the effects of options in education can also be found in American Charter Schools and in New Zealand. There are indications that Charter Schools are, in comparison to other public schools, disproportionally more ‘white’ than ‘black’ (Cobb, Glass & Crockett, 2000). Research into the effects of complete freedom of choice as regards schools in New Zealand shows that the competition between schools increases, thereby resulting in the population groups with the very lowest socio-economic status becoming concentrated in a limited number of poorly functioning schools (Fiske & Ladd, 2000). Both studies reveal that ‘choice’, despite all the good intentions, contributes to an increase in differences between population groups in education and as such constitutes a threat to social cohesion in society, both in the US and in New Zealand.

Question 2:
If more differences arise between schools, can those differences also have an effect on the extent to which schools have social capital at their disposal? And is anything known about the consequences of differences in school climate for educational achievements and social cohesion in society?

Social capital is a term which means the combination of trust, shared standards and networks. Social capital is not something which is present in people but which exists between people themselves and between people and organisations (Leeuw, 2001). Why some people are richer, healthier, or happier than others is not only explained by their physical, human or financial capital but also by their relationships. In other words, it is based on their positions within social networks. Other research has also revealed that as more people, organisations
and societies have additional social capital at their disposal, the more effective and efficient they are grosso modo and the more capable they are of achieving their goals. Examples are goals relating to the spread of innovations within organisations, the breaching of the phenomenon of the ‘glass ceiling’ in women's careers, the reducing of conflicts in organisations, etc. (Flap et al, 1999 and OECD, 2001).

The Inspectorate also collects, albeit to a limited extent, data on schools' social capital. School supervision in fact also focuses on the relationships of schools with their environments, in particular the networks maintained by schools with parents and external organisations. As far as contacts with parents are concerned, almost all primary schools appear to inform parents to a reasonable degree on progress at the school and on the development and level of educational attainment of their children. In this respect, there is little variation between schools. The area in which schools do differ is the extent to which they go one step further than simply informing parents, using them instead as sources of information. This means finding out about parents' views and expectations vis-à-vis education and the development of their children and also means stimulating parental support in the home situation. Between ten and twenty percent of primary schools undertake few activities in this area (Inspectorate of Education, 2001).

Particularly in American research, the issue of the relationship between schools' social capital and pupils' educational achievements has become known as research into the ‘Catholic school effect on learning’, as initiated by Coleman (1990) (see also Morgan & Sorensen, 1999). The central issue is how to explain the better achievements of Catholic schools. One explanation harks back to the content of the Catholic faith which, according to Morgan and Sorensen, is clearly based on the idea that every individual counts and that it is partially for this reason that teachers at such schools dedicate themselves to the needs of all pupils. A different explanation is that these schools are better because the parents have a close(r) communal bond with the school which in turn means that pupils are more able to use the (social and other) resources that these networks offer. It should be clear that ‘the social capital of schools in relationship to differences between schools’ requires additional research. Until that time, it will not be possible to make any empirically-founded statements on the matter.

Question 3:
*If today's society can be characterised more and more as a multicultural and network society in which cooperation and the entering into of 'partnerships' is essential, will the attention paid in education to the theme of 'social cohesion' as 'education' help to prepare pupils for this society?*

In the mid-Nineties, the Delors report (Delors, 1996, p. 91) stated that in addition to the known functions of education (learning in order to know, learning in order to do and learning in order to be), learning to ‘cooperate and live with others’ as well as learning to enter into relationships with others, requires more explicit attention in the 21st century. A variety of studies have shown that quite a lot of work is going on elsewhere in the world on the social objective of not only, or primarily, assigning a cognitive, educating function to education but also ensuring that education contributes to ‘citizenship’. Cogan and Derricott (1998) describe what is being done in countries such as England, Scotland, Hungary, Canada, the Netherlands and the US with regard to ‘citizenship education’.
The international comparative research published in the spring of 2001 which involved 90,000 young people in almost 30 countries (not including the Netherlands) and which came about under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, includes statements on, among other things, the role of schools in ‘civic education’. It transpires that schools which operate in a participatory, democratic manner also create an open climate in which to deal with issues relating to ‘civic education’.

Although in Dutch education, ‘social cohesion’ as a subject matter area has not yet taken off, it is of course not the case that schools do not focus any of the education they provide on knowledge, skills and attitudes that pupils can use in their social lives. If social cohesion is to be interpreted as an ‘education’ then we are talking of a subject matter domain which (may) cover(s), among other things, the following aspects in an integrated manner: dealing with differences between people - no matter what their nature; intercultural teaching and learning, social competencies, learning to cooperate, safety and interacting with respect (Heynemann, 2000 and Ritzen, 2000).

Primary schools appear to focus attention principally on stimulating mutual respect between pupils and encouraging pupil self-confidence. Almost all primary schools score satisfactorily with respect to these indicators and, as a result, there are almost no differences between the various schools. The Inspectorate is of the opinion that Dutch schools are good at achieving a safe and structuring school climate (see Inspectorate of Education, 2000). In both cases, teachers are central elements. However, in the case of elements which focus more on challenging pupils to learn, in which situations the pupil is the controlling factor, by no means all schools comply with the requirements imposed. A quarter of primary schools can be criticised with regard to the extent to which the subject matter provision goes some way to accommodating differences between pupils. The extent to which schools encourage pupils in the development of independence, intercultural education and the fostering of cooperation and support are certainly areas which are open to improvement. Less than half of schools are active in these areas. Differences between schools are also much greater here. Thus, ‘black schools’ appear to do more on intercultural education than ‘white schools’ (Inspectorate of Education, 2001).

While taking stock of this third question, it is advisable to examine the theme of social cohesion in more detail on behalf of primary and secondary education. Some schools are already paying attention to this matter, albeit in a rather fragmented way, under changing denominators and certainly not comprehensively. Such an examination would also generate possibilities of raising the matter of other forms of education, such as intercultural education, and new forms of education, such as social competencies, in a more integrated and effective manner.

CONCLUSIONS

There are two sides to variety

This article has examined the desire to achieve variety and the possible consequences it can have for the quality and accessibility of education. It has been asserted that variety is extremely desirable in general terms and should be encouraged because otherwise there will
be no innovations. However, there is also a shadow side. On the basis of the Dutch education inspectorate’s function regarding guaranteeing (minimal) educational quality, it is obvious that differences between schools should be tolerated as long as schools ensure that their statutory assignments and their function within the education system are not harmed. This means that the position of the Dutch education inspectorate has to find a new balance between being, on the one hand, the guardian of educational quality and the stimulus to (for?) educational improvement on the other.

The first task which this generates for an Education Inspectorate involves guaranteeing that differences between schools do not lead to restrictions in pupils’ opportunities to develop. Mechanisms must be available which ensure that, in principle, all pupils are able to follow courses successfully at their schools, even if they enter schools during the course of the school year.

The task of an Education Inspectorate is not only to guarantee the basic quality of schools but also to encourage the development of education and provide space for variety which might benefit the quality of education. Supervision therefore takes place on the basis of several perspectives, two of which we will examine here:

- stimulating variety;
- guaranteeing basic quality.

**Stimulating variety**

One of the factors which might hinder school development and variety is current legislation and regulations. The question is, however, whether the removal or liberalisation of the statutory framework in itself offers schools satisfactory opportunities to adapt education more effectively to the needs of schools, parents and pupils (see Oosterbeek, 2001).

As argued above, schools are not making maximum use of the space available to them. In addition, mechanisms exist at schools and in education policy which have a limiting or uniforming effect on variety. Examples are rules which are developed at schools themselves. Organisation research has shown that organisations which are given the opportunity of acting (more) freely and of not having to comply so rigidly with guidelines sometimes succeed in developing more guidelines ‘from the bottom up’ than used to be imposed ‘from the top down’ (Lammers, 1993). Other mechanisms which have been referred to earlier concern the effect of public opinion and of parents, the role of school governing bodies, central management boards and super-school management, school advisory services, curriculum development, path-dependencies and supervision.

It is important to keep an eye open for these sorts of mechanisms. One should add to this that the Inspectorate itself can also affect variety. The Inspectorate must therefore not only ascertain what influence it has on the quality of education and its development but, during the course of supervision, also detail the other factors that have an effect, whether or not in a mutual context, on the quality of individual schools and on the quality of education in general. The Inspectorate also wishes to gain a more systematic insight into (formal and informal) factors which ensure that schools do want to innovate and provide variety but fail do so, for whatever reason.
Guaranteeing basic quality

About 5% of Dutch primary and secondary schools do not attain the basic quality standards. The educational achievements do not correspond with the expectations and the choice of subjects offered and the education process are subject to serious deficiencies. In the Dutch situation, around 15% of primary school pupils leave school with insufficient language and arithmetic skills. These children then often gain poor results in secondary education and often experience major problems during their adult lives (Tesser, Merens & Van Praag, 1999).

From the social point of view, it is unfair that children are the victims of a school's failure to function properly. Above all, it is alarming that a lot of children from risk groups attend poorly functioning schools. These are not only children from ethnic minority groups, but also children with poorly educated Dutch parents.

Supervision in the Netherlands is intensified as the quality of schools becomes more alarming. This implies that the most intensive supervision will be provided at schools with the greatest problems. This is the case at around 400 primary schools and approximately 30 secondary schools. Because these schools are also attended by a relatively large number of risk pupils with unfavourable prospects for the future, it is precisely these children who are disadvantaged even more due to the fact that their schools do not function properly. Many of these schools are in situations in which they are unable to manage their quality improvement programmes on their own account and at their own expense. This is why the Inspectorate advocates the provision of extra support to these schools to enable them to undergo further development.
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