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Language and Literacy

Dutch is the first official language in the Netherlands. Frisian, the second, is spoken by more than 350,000 people in the northern province of Friesland.[1] Though Dutch is the first language of instruction in schools, Frisian or a regional dialect may be taught alongside Dutch. A minority of secondary schools offer Frisian as an optional final examination subject. English is the first foreign language students learn and is taught from the last two years of primary school onward. A growing number of primary schools (more than 1,150 in 2015) offer up to four hours of English lessons per week beginning in kindergarten.[2]

The ethnic composition of the people in the Netherlands is diverse, but the majority of the population is Dutch. In 2015, ethnic minorities accounted for 22 percent of the population. These minorities include people from Turkey, Morocco, Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, and Indonesia, among other countries.[3]

The goal of the National Center for Language Education (*Expertisecentrum Nederlands*) is to improve the teaching and learning of Dutch language arts in preprimary, primary, and secondary schools. By undertaking research and development projects, the center studies school conditions that help students become skilled and motivated communicators and readers. In this respect, interactive language instruction is the focus of teaching Dutch as a first and second language. Interactive language instruction is intended to promote social, meaningful, and strategic learning.[4]

Overview of the Education System

One of the key features of the Dutch education system is freedom of education, which is guaranteed by Article 23 of the Constitution. Each resident of the Netherlands has the right to establish a school; determine the educational, religious, or ideological principles on which the school is based; and organize instruction in that school.[5] Dutch schools, then, have significant autonomy.

The Dutch education system comprises several levels of responsibility: national government, provincial and municipal authorities, school boards, and school principals. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science sets the regulatory and legislative framework for educational provision while also structuring and funding the system.[6] Provincial and municipal authorities have jurisdiction over the education provided in their province or town.

Public schools are run by the municipal authorities or by a governing committee appointed by the municipality for this purpose. However, most children attend private schools that are founded on specific religious or pedagogical beliefs. Indeed, two-thirds of primary schools are privately run. The majority of private schools are Roman Catholic or Protestant, but the Netherlands has other religious schools and schools based on philosophical principles (e.g., Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and humanist schools), as well as nondenominational schools. The pedagogical approach of some schools is based on the ideas of educational reformers such as Maria Montessori, Helen Parkhurst, Peter Petersen, Célestin Freinet, and Rudolf Steiner. All schools have a school board, which is the legally recognized authority. Each school board administers and manages the schools for which it is responsible. School boards have autonomy with regard to the curriculum, budget allocations, in-service teacher education, and school policies (e.g., disciplinary actions and parental involvement). The principal handles the school's day to day management.[7]

The Dutch Inspectorate for Education monitors the quality of education and schools by visiting schools periodically (at least once every four years) to observe compliance with statutory regulations, reporting its findings to the Ministry of Education and the individual schools.[8] These reports are publicly available. Schools that do not reach the expected quality of education are placed under close supervision, are visited more frequently, and receive additional support and funding to help them to raise the level of education provided.

Parents in the Netherlands can choose from a range of public and private schools, both of which are government funded. Education is free for all students up to the age of 16, although most schools ask for a voluntary parental contribution for additional services such as class outings and school trips. Unlike public schools, which must admit all students, private schools may impose criteria for admission. In practice, however, most private schools pursue nonrestrictive admission policies.

Structure of the Education System

The education system in the Netherlands is separated into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. The Netherlands has no provision for formal education for children under age 4.

In the Netherlands, the same school offers preprimary education (kindergarten) and primary education. Most children start primary school at age 4, although compulsory schooling does not start until age 5. Preprimary and primary education together consist of eight grades, so most children enter secondary education at age 12.

Secondary education in the Netherlands involves tracking with separate schools for different age groups. As of the 2014–2015 school year, all students in the final year of primary school are required to participate in a final test that aims to determine the most appropriate secondary school track for each student.[9] These tests are subject to approval by the Dutch government. About 86 percent of students in the final year of secondary education participate in the Cito test (*Cito-toets*), which consists of two compulsory components, Dutch language and mathematics.[10] World orientation (e.g., knowledge of history, science, and geography) is offered as an optional part of the tests. In addition to

the results of these tests, recommendations from classroom teachers are considered when determining the most appropriate secondary school track for each student.

Most secondary schools in the Netherlands offer more than one track. Students in those schools enroll in one of the following three tracks after one or two years of basic education:

- Prevocational secondary education—This track, which lasts for two years, offers basic vocational, middle management vocational, combined vocational and theoretical, and theoretical learning pathways. After completing prevocational secondary education, students may continue on to vocational secondary education or senior general secondary education.

- Senior general secondary education—This track, which lasts for five years, offers general secondary education in Science and Technology, Science and Health, Culture and Society, and Economics and Society. Upon completion of one of these programs, students can continue on to an additional preuniversity secondary education program or a higher vocational education program.

- Preuniversity secondary education—This track, which lasts for six years, offers the same four programs as senior general secondary education. After completing a program, students may continue on to higher education in a three year bachelor's degree program at a university.

Tertiary or higher education is divided into two types of programs: higher vocational education programs and bachelor's degree programs. Higher vocational education programs lead to a four year bachelor's degree. Bachelor's degree programs lead to a three year bachelor's degree, after which a master's degree can be earned in one to three years.

Language/Reading Curriculum in the Fourth Grade

Reading Policy

To ensure a high quality of education in primary schools, the Ministry of Education prescribes a number of core objectives, established in 1993 and revised in 2006, that students are expected to master before they enter secondary education at age 12.[11] The 58 core objectives cover Dutch language, English language, Frisian language, arithmetic and mathematics, personal and world orientation, art, and physical education. The freedom of education principle guaranteed by the Dutch Constitution allows schools to determine which curriculum subjects they will teach, the content of those subjects, how much time students will spend on each subject, and when and how the students will be assessed. Thus, the core objectives describe attainment targets only; they neither describe how these targets should be reached nor prescribe any didactics.

Summary of National Curriculum

Core objectives describe in general terms the skills and knowledge a child must have acquired by the end of primary school. Since 2010, reference levels have specifically prescribed the level of knowledge and skills that students must attain in Dutch language and mathematics in any given year of schooling.[12] This framework of desired learning results aims to improve alignment among the various types of primary and secondary education schools.[13]

The 12 core objectives for the area of Dutch language are divided into three sections: Oral Education, Written Education, and Linguistics.[14] In the Oral Education section, students learn to:

- Acquire information from spoken language while simultaneously reproducing this information orally or in writing in a structured way

- Express themselves in a meaningful and engaging manner when giving or requesting information, reporting, giving explanations, instructing, and participating in discussions

- Assess information in discussions that is informative or persuasive and learn to respond with arguments

In the Written Education section, students learn to:

- Retrieve information from informative and instructive texts (e.g., diagrams, tables, and digital sources)

- Write meaningful and appealing texts with different functions (e.g., informative, instructive, convincing, and enjoyable texts)

- Structure information and opinions when reading instructional texts and systematically structured print and electronic sources

- Compare and assess information and opinions in different textual forms

- Structure information and opinions when writing a letter, report, form, or paper, paying attention to syntax, correct spelling, legible writing, formatting, images, and, in some cases, color

- Derive pleasure from reading and writing stories, poems, and informative texts

In the Linguistics section, students learn to:

- Recognize, express, use, and assess strategies for oral and written language education

- Use linguistic principles and rules (e.g., distinguish between the subject, verbal predicate, and predicate components of a sentence; understand spelling rules and proper usage of punctuation marks)

- Acquire an adequate vocabulary, strategies for understanding unknown words, and the ability to use terms allowing students to think and talk about language

Formal reading and writing instruction begins in Grade 1 (UNESCO's ISCED level 1) when children are age 6.[15] Preparatory instruction in kindergarten provides an introduction to phonemic awareness and grapheme identification, which is used in instruction in the upper grades. Although the first year of reading instruction in Grade 1 includes reading stories, few instructional activities are aimed at developing reading comprehension; rather, instruction at this grade level emphasizes the acquisition of decoding skills. Most schools adopt a curriculum for reading comprehension instruction beginning in Grade 2.

Over the eight years of schooling at the primary level, schools must provide 7,520 teaching hours with at least 3,520 hours in the first four years and at least 3,760 hours in the last four years. Primary

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schools are free to determine the length of a school day, so the timetables can be adjusted to the needs of the school, the students, or parents. The Ministry of Education determines the dates of the beginning and end of the school year and the length and dates of the summer, Christmas and May holidays; all other vacations are decided by the schools.

Teachers, Teacher Education, and Professional Development

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

Primary school teacher education colleges provide four year preservice programs for students who have finished secondary education. Most teacher education programs consist of practical work experience in primary or special education. After completion, students receive a bachelor's degree that qualifies them to teach all subjects (except physical education) across the primary school curriculum.

Since 2006, students entering teacher education colleges have been tested on their Dutch language and mathematics skills in order to guarantee standards of competence. Students who fail the test have one year to improve their language and mathematics skills. If they have not passed the test by the end of the school year, they cannot continue on to the next year.[16] As of 2015, students also are obligated to demonstrate their knowledge of world orientation (e.g., geography, history, nature, and technology) before starting at the teacher education college.[17,18]

Since 2008, academic teacher education courses have been available at the university level. These courses were created to increase teachers' academic potential.[19]

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Additional non-compulsory training is available to teachers in various fields through teacher training colleges and institutions such as school advisory services. Teachers can decide whether they want additional training and in what subject (e.g., language and arithmetic seminars, coaching of teachers, inclusive education, and children's behavior).[20] Training is provided for primary education professionals taking on new roles, such as internal student counselors, arithmetic and language coordinators, junior and senior department coordinators, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) coordinators.

Reading Instruction in the Primary Grades

Instructional Materials

Schools are free to choose the instructional materials they use without government input. Several varieties of commercially developed instructional materials and teaching methods are available for schools, though some schools develop their own materials. The Netherlands Institute for Curriculum Development advises schools about the appropriateness of available instructional materials and teaching methods for the Dutch curriculum. Textbooks are available for integrated and separate language and reading education. A considerable amount of additional material addresses spelling and grammar.

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Most schools use an indirect phonics method called Learning to Read Safely in reading instruction.[21] Particularly during the first four months of reading instruction, the structure of the written and spoken language is emphasized as students learn the relationship between graphemes and phonemes. Halfway through Grade 1, most children are able to decode simple Dutch words. Emphasis on improving fluency and decoding skills by having students read short texts increases during the second part of Grade 1.

Use of Technology

Research shows that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is used prominently in schools in the Netherlands for student tracking, communication, and lesson preparation and instruction in all subject areas. During recent years, the use of digital teaching materials has increased.[22] About 50 percent of primary education teachers report using a computer during lessons for more than 10 hours a week. Approximately one computer is available for every four students, and almost all computers have Internet access.

The government supported Knowledge Centre for ICT in Education (*Kennisnet*) is the main public support organization for educational ICT use in primary, secondary, and adult education in the Netherlands. The Knowledge Centre "provides independent advice and services to support and inspire educational institutions in the effective use of ICT toward the continued improvement in the quality of learning."[23] The organization annually publishes the *Four in Balance Monitor*, about ICT in Dutch primary, secondary, and vocational education. This publication summarizes research about ICT and provides statistics about the use of ICT in Dutch education.

Role of Reading Specialists

Students with reading difficulties often are helped by a remedial teacher or a speech therapist who is associated with the school or an advisory service. Primary education has seen a trend in employing coordinators who are responsible for a certain subject or age group (e.g., internal student counselors, junior department coordinators, senior department coordinators, language coordinators, and arithmetic coordinators). Together with teachers and school administrators, reading coordinators with specialized knowledge of reading implement and evaluate the primary school's reading policy. Sixty-six percent of primary schools have a reading coordinator. If necessary, the reading coordinator will coach and guide staff.[24]

Second Language Instruction

Approximately 25 percent of the students in (special) primary education do not speak Dutch as their first language.[25] Because schools are free to determine their own curricula, they are able to focus on areas of instruction that meet their students' needs. Schools with large minority student populations devote more attention to vocabulary and verbal communication than do schools whose student populations primarily consist of native Dutch-speaking students.

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Several initiatives have been launched to enhance language proficiency for students who are second language learners. "Bridging classes" for primary school students, for example, give students with limited Dutch language skills the opportunity to spend a year learning Dutch before returning to regular classes. Early childhood education programs (e.g., play groups and childcare) that focus on Dutch language learning aim to reduce the language and achievement gap for minority groups before they enter primary education.[26] Despite these efforts, however, second language learners still have lower achievement in mathematics and in language, enroll in lower levels of secondary education, and have a higher dropout rate than native Dutch-speaking students.[27]

Accommodation Policies for Instruction and Testing

The most important reform to primary and secondary education in recent years was the introduction of inclusive education for children with special educational needs in August 2014. Schools now have a "duty of care" to place each student in a suitable educational setting, whether in a school for children with special educational needs or in a mainstream school that is able to provide additional support and guidance.[28] Schools receive additional funding for students with special needs so they can hire specially trained teachers and other personnel or make other accommodations to support these students.

Students with Reading Difficulties

Diagnostic Testing and Instruction for Children with Reading Difficulties

Schools first provide students with reading difficulties with extra training in reading by the (remedial) teacher. If the difficulties persist, the next step involves intensive specific intervention for the student, often given by a reading specialist within the school. If the specialist observes signs of a reading disability, the student can be sent to a specialist (e.g., a psychologist) for further diagnostic testing and treatment outside of the school.[29]

Approximately 10 percent of primary education students in the Netherlands have difficulties with reading; about 4 percent of students are diagnosed with dyslexia, which may have serious consequences for their cognitive and socioemotional development.[30] To better equip primary school teachers with training to guide these students, the National Center for Language Education (*Expertisecentrum Nederlands*) has published the Reading Problems and Dyslexia Protocol.[31] Intended for remedial teachers, internal counselors, and speech therapists who work with students in Grades 1 to 8, this protocol contains guidelines for a structured schoolwide dyslexia policy wherein regular assessments facilitate early identification, prevention, and intervention of reading difficulties.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

Since the 2014–2015 school year, primary schools have been required to use a student monitoring system to assess the reading ability of students in Grades 1 to 8.[32] The Student Tracking System allows teachers and schools to monitor the development of individual students and entire classes throughout primary education. Although schools are free to choose which student monitoring system they use,

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most primary schools use the Student Tracking System developed by the National Institute for Educational Measurement (CITO). This system also is used by the Dutch Education Inspectorate to assess the quality of education in each school. Parents usually receive a report detailing their child's progress three times a year. Because tests are administered on a regular basis, problems usually are identified at an early stage and are subsequently analyzed to devise a remedial action plan.

Students whose progress lags behind that of their classmates may be held back one year. No statutory rules determine when a student should repeat a grade, but grade repetition is avoided to the greatest extent possible.

Special Reading Initiatives

The Dutch Reading Foundation (*Stichting Lezen*) was established to promote reading for pleasure both in Dutch and Frisian and to foster a strong reading culture. The foundation supports the reading policy of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science by allocating funds and stimulating projects that encourage and support reading. It initiates projects that promote reading, supports the development of new reading instruction methods, and funds research. The National Reading Aloud Days (*Nationale Voorleesdagen*) and the National Reading Aloud Competition (*Nationale Voorleeswedstrijd*) are examples of projects that the foundation has organized. Additionally, the foundation organized the Library in School (*Bibliotheek op school*) project in which 44 percent of Dutch primary schools participate. As part of this program, libraries and schools collaborate to promote reading.[33]

The Ministries of Education, Social Affairs, and Health recently established the Count with Language (*Tel mee met Taal*) program to promote reading.[34]

Use and Impact of PIRLS

The government has funded the Netherlands' participation in international studies since the 1960s. The Netherlands participated in IEA's first international study of reading achievement, the Reading Literacy Study, in 1991; the country has been involved in its successor, PIRLS, ever since.

While the Dutch PIRLS results showed Dutch students performing well internationally, a decrease in reading achievement occurred from 2001 to 2011.[35] To tackle the problem of declining student performance both in language and in mathematics, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science launched two reform programs, the Quality Agenda in 2007 and its successor, Basis for Performance, in 2011.[36] These programs outline the steps being taken to reinforce the commitment of the Netherlands to ensuring that literacy and numeracy remain core focuses at all levels of the education system. There are specific goals for; the end of primary school attainment test; the number of underperforming schools; schools that are labeled excellent; and the percentage of schools with output-oriented education.

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PIRLS 2011 and TIMSS 2011 showed a relatively low percentage of Dutch students reaching the advanced benchmarks as compared to that of other high achieving countries. The results indicate that Dutch students reached a basic level of reading competency but were not given the chance to excel.[37] Because of these results, several programs have been introduced that focus on developing achievement in education. Early results of these policy initiatives showed that most participating schools already have seen improvement in student performance.[38]

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