

Overview

RON BRANDT

School Reform in the Netherlands and Here

At a time when many American schools are raising requirements for promotion from grade to grade, schools in the Netherlands are planning to make their programs more individualized and child-centered. I learned about that last fall when along with four other education journalists I visited the Netherlands as a guest of the Dutch government.

Most schools in the Netherlands have what many Americans admire: a traditional subject-centered curriculum tied closely to rigorous national examinations, and a tracking system under which high-scoring students are taught in separate institutions by the best educated teachers. Nearly all teachers are literate, respected, and relatively well paid. An unusual feature of Dutch education is that religious and independent schools are fully supported by government funds and parents are free to choose the type of school they want.

The Dutch are not abandoning this system, but they do plan to "democratize" it somewhat. At the secondary level they expect to postpone the age at which students choose—mostly on the basis of examination scores—the type of secondary school they will attend. The government is encouraging merger of schools with different programs—general with university preparation or vocational with general, for example—to make them a little more like American comprehensive schools.

Plans at the elementary level are even more ambitious. Existing two-year nursery schools are being consolidated with nearby six-year primary schools. The move is described officially as an effort to extend the developmental philosophy of nursery schools into primary and upper grades. Eventually, "... the traditional division into classes and school years will no longer be obligatory" and "... all children, irrespective of colour, or origin, should be able to complete their nursery and primary schooling successfully."¹

It was strange to hear high-ranking officials decry the damaging effects of a 10 percent failure rate at the end of first grade and speak movingly of the need

for education to "respect the continuous development of the individual pupil."² In the teachers' lounge of an experimental open school in a low-income neighborhood in Amsterdam, I listened with admiring incredulity as Han Van Gelder, the young Directoret-General for Primary Education, explained the superiority of developmental education and predicted a smooth transition to the new approach in hundreds of public and private schools.

I conceded that I didn't know enough about circumstances in the Netherlands, but observed that few educators in the U.S. would think of trying to engineer the massive conversion he envisioned. Our hosts assured me that legislation authorizing the change had been adopted by Parliament and that the large majority of Dutch citizens approved or accepted the idea. Furthermore they said, 80 percent of teachers and principals supported the program.

For me, crossing the Atlantic was like stepping back a decade or more to a time when American educators talked freely about individuality and innovation—when bold changes in curriculum and organization of schools seemed more desirable and achievable. Now we are more cautious. Part of the reason is that research reports, of which "A Study of Schooling" is the most recent and most searching, present a disillusioning picture of *A Place Called School*. Grasping us gently by the chin, loving critic John Goodlad compels us to look closely at real classrooms, then compare what we see with our aspirations.

By stating the bald truth about the emperor's clothes, Goodlad and his associates make some people angry and others despondent, but they also make us think more deeply about ways to achieve our goals. They do not claim that curriculum reform is impossible; they say it can be achieved—but only with patience, trust, and enormous investment in DDAE: dialogue, direction, action, evaluation.

Maybe educators in the Netherlands are ready for action because school by
—Continued on page 80.

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Continued from p. 3.

school they have engaged in appropriate dialogue and reached consensus about direction. Or maybe Dutch officials underestimate the difficulty of reforming education; I don't know. But on this side of the Atlantic, Goodlad and his associates offer American educators more than a sobering reminder of how things are; they also suggest a way to do something about it.

¹Address by A. J. Hermes, State Secretary for Education and Science, September 28, 1982.

²"The Primary School Innovation Process in the Netherlands," a joint publication of the Departmental Project Group on Primary School Innovation and the Primary School Innovation Committee (The Hague/Zeist: Netherlands Ministry of Education and Science, February 1980), p. 9.

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Index to Advertisers

Boston University	39
CTB/McGraw Hill	25, 37, 47
Excel, Inc.	44
Media & Methods	25
National Association of Elementary School Principals	Cover 3
Pepperdine University	66
TSC/Houghton Mifflin	60
The World Bank	Cover 2

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