

Summary and conclusions

De basis meester / Mastering the basics

A. Summary

This report describes how different actors involved in primary and secondary education in the Netherlands feel about the need to improve the quality of education in basic skills, with more attention being given to language and arithmetic/mathematics in the curriculum and a stronger focus on results. The report is based on a qualitative study carried out in three different rounds: a written round involving 75 participants, followed by two more in-depth rounds of group interviews with a proportion of these participants. The report presents the views of school management teams, school boards, primary and secondary teachers, parents in school participation councils, internal supervisors, local authority policy staff and council officials with responsibility for education. The group discussions that followed the written round offered an opportunity to discuss the initial findings in more depth.

The central questions addressed in this study relate to the support for the policy objective and the division of roles between the various actors involved. Do stakeholders share the sense of urgency concerning this focus on basic skills? How much value do they attach to increasing the focus on results? What is the role of each stakeholder in improving educational quality? Are the roles and responsibilities clear? Are there currently any practical problems?

The purpose of the study was to obtain a picture of the widest possible range of opinions, attitudes and behaviours in the educational field with regard to educational quality and basic skills. The study addressed these issues from the specific perspective of the various actors. A clearer insight into the motives of the different stakeholders for favouring or opposing the achievement of this national policy objective is important for the further implementation and execution of the policy. The study was an initiative of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research/SCP and was not carried out on a contract basis.

The total of 75 participants in the study came from a variety of Dutch municipalities and from different schools. They were employed primarily in the *Randstad* (the Western conurbation containing the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht), but also in municipalities in the provinces of Noord-Brabant and Gelderland.

The urgency of the problem is disputed to a degree, yet people consider the focus important

Before the question of whether there is support for this policy can be answered, it is relevant to establish whether the participants in the study believe that the quality of education is sufficient at present, or whether pupil achievements in language, arithmetic and mathematics are below a certain desired standard. The participants did not find it easy to define 'educational quality'. Some felt that such a definition is not possible. Many participants felt that defining educational quality is a subjective question that is

dependent on the time and the political climate. Despite differing interpretations of what constitutes quality of education (only the educational output or outcomes, or does quality also relate to the input – such as the quality of the teachers – and the educational process?), the participants in the study did believe that educational quality can be measured. In the discussion about measuring or establishing educational quality, criticism emerged about the way in which the Dutch Inspectorate of Education determines whether or not a school is delivering quality. They felt that the Inspectorate assessments take too little account of the starting level of pupils and have too little appreciation for what the school adds to that level.

The participants themselves assessed the quality of the education in their school or municipality using different criteria. Their criteria were mainly actor-specific, i.e. criteria related to or of direct importance for the position occupied by the participant in the educational field. It was the teachers who explicitly took mastery of basic skills as a criterion. In addition to these actor or role-specific criteria, all participants and actors attached a great deal of value to measurable data as an indicator for the quality of education at a school. These data include the results obtained in national examinations, school test results, the number of pupils having to repeat years, the number of school-leavers and the number of attaining a leaving qualification. Not everyone felt that such data were sufficient on their own; there is currently no absolute quality standard for education. Many participants also argued that some aspects of educational quality cannot be measured but are still very valuable, such as the atmosphere at school.

The questions about the quality of education and the ability to define quality formed a precursor to the central theme of this study: more focus on language and arithmetic/mathematics. The primary and secondary teachers who took part in the study were almost unanimous in their view that pupils' knowledge and skills in language and arithmetic/mathematics are currently deficient. However, there was also scepticism, especially among school managers, about the idea that educational standards are low or falling in these areas. School heads talked about hype, in which the media play a major role. Despite this, all actors were clear in their support for this policy objective: they felt it was particularly important to devote attention to basic skills, whether or not they believed that current achievement levels are generally good.

Support for the policy is thus based not so much on underperformance by Dutch pupils in an international perspective, as on the personal observations of the participants. It was primarily teachers who commented that pupils are failing to achieve the standards that might be expected of them, and that a lack of basic knowledge and skills stands on the way of both teaching and learning. This impedes progress both in language and arithmetic/mathematics themselves, as well as in other learning areas or subjects. The participants included secondary school teachers who had worked in education for ten years or longer; they reported that they are less able than in the past to build on the basic knowledge and skills possessed by their pupils in their teaching. The examples they cited were very telling. It is these experiences which create support for the policy, and it is for this reason that the participants were almost unanimous in feeling that the focus on basic skills should apply for all pupils, in all groups or classes, at all schools and in both sectors (primary and secondary education). Participants expect most from better

instruction or better methods in language and arithmetic, but also believe that much more time could be devoted to these subjects.

The 'principle versus practice' dilemma in secondary education

Although the participants fairly readily admitted in the first study round that this issue requires a generic approach, this proved to be a slightly more complicated matter during the group discussions. The discussions brought out differences in opinion and approach between the participants working in primary education and those in secondary education. There was support among secondary school teachers for a focus on basic skills – people are in principle in favour – but this focus is barely put into practice at all. This reflects the view of these teachers that teaching children reading, writing and arithmetic is the core task of the primary school, whereas in secondary school the focus is different: the subject 'arithmetic' no longer exists, and nor do the subjects 'language' or 'reading and writing'. Although attention is devoted to various language skills in the subject 'Dutch language', that subject obviously entails more than this.

It was therefore not immediately clear to the participants how the lack of basic skills on the part of pupils can be eliminated in secondary education and whose responsibility this should be. It emerged from the discussions that the 'ownership' of this task is not self-evident. School managements are making various attempts to ensure that their teachers address these shortcomings in pupils, but in many cases without success. According to the participants, subject teachers are for example not very keen when marking written tests to correct pupils' spelling mistakes as well. There is currently no integral approach, in which an eye is kept on the basic skills in all subjects, whereas the participants felt that this was an area where improvement is needed.

Secondary school teachers regard the idea of having to devote attention in their subject lessons to basic language and arithmetical skills as an additional burden, as 'yet another thing we have to do'. At the same time, those same teachers acknowledge that it is more difficult to convey the subject matter to pupils who do not have a command of these basic skills. Something definitely needs to be done, therefore, but there is presently little idea of how to go about it. Secondary schools come up with different, often more ad hoc than structural solutions. For example, language and arithmetic revision sessions are organised during free timetable hours or during special 'surgeries'. Secondary school teachers feel that the available time and resources are insufficient to eliminate the deficiencies in pupils' command of language and arithmetic. Other participants and actors, such as parents in the school participation council, believe it is a 'waste of time' to have to teach material to secondary school pupils which should have been covered in primary school. Most participants agreed that primary education is by definition the place where these basic skills should be acquired.

For primary school teachers, it is more obvious that this focus on basic skills should form part of their teaching; this is after all one of their core tasks. Yet there are doubts among primary school teachers about placing such a central focus on this policy objective, and above all about the result-focused working method which is intended to accompany this focus on basic skills.

More emphasis on performance and results: not everyone is enthusiastic. Participants were very divided on the question of whether primary and secondary schools devote sufficient attention to educational performance or results. Some believe that this is obvious and in some cases has actually gone too far, while others feel it does not go far enough. In order to bring about a targeted improvement in the teaching of basic skills, it is important to have a picture of (trends in) achievement. Some participants in the study said they do not have such an overview. This need not be problematic, at least if every actor is aware of the achievement level that is important for their ability to perform their own function or tasks adequately.

Parents on the school participation council, local authorities and internal school supervisors are largely dependent on other actors for information on school achievement. Those actors say they by no means always have (timely) access to the relevant information. In the case of the local authority, this is because of the dependence on the goodwill of school boards. In the case of the school participation council, the cause is lack of professionalism in the organisation. Actors who could access this information, such as school managements and school boards, do not always make use of this possibility in practice. This is partly because of the size of the school organisation (so big as to make it impossible to maintain an overview), but also the way in which school managements interpret their role.

Proponents of a more result-focused working method in education describe a culture in education which they say stands on the way of placing more emphasis on performance and results. They accept that a focus on results should be evidence-based, but not all participants in the study were enthusiastic about it. The idea of more tests and examinations provoke resistance among some teachers, but also among other stakeholders. Such an approach is felt to be too one-sided and too restrictive, and is not always in line with their own educational/didactic principles. However, there also appears to be some fear of greater openness, and possibly of being 'held to account' for pupils' achievements. In addition, schools have difficulty in interpreting the performance figures they already gather and translating them into educational practice. This may be more a question of getting used to a new system, because participants who have experience in working in a result-focused way, after initial scepticism, take a positive view of the method.

Positive view of focus, but risk of curriculum impoverishment dampens enthusiasm somewhat

Most of the participants see more advantages than disadvantages in a focus on basic skills. Nonetheless, both explicit proponents and sceptics point out a number of drawbacks. For example, participants expect other subjects and areas to be squeezed by too one-sided a focus on language and arithmetic. Moreover, there is a danger with a focus on results of 'teaching to the test', in which pupils are mainly taught things that are likely to come up in the tests.

Some participants were unable to assess how the focus on basic skills would affect different pupils. Pupils with lower cognitive abilities or with dyslexia or dyscalculia could be disadvantaged, but so could the better-performing pupils. There is a danger that less time and attention would be devoted to developing pupils' broader talents. According

to some participants, the focus on basic skills also leads to an undesirable hierarchy of subjects 'which matter' and less relevant subjects. On the one hand, participants considered it very important that more attention should be devoted to basic skills (and realised that this may come at a price), but on the other hand they were concerned about retaining a broad and rich educational offering. The support for an emphasis on basic skills and a focus on results in order to improve educational achievement and quality thus has its limits.

Implementation is impeded by the limitations of teachers

In addition to the reservations about this policy objective cited above, it is also the case that not all teachers themselves have a good command of basic skills. Participants pointed out the lack of quality at primary school teacher training colleges, which is having an adverse impact on primary education. As regards secondary education, one school head reported that there is a taboo in secondary schools on referring to the shortcomings of teachers themselves. Some primary and secondary school teachers simply lack these skills, whether in relation to correct use of language or the ability to perform arithmetical calculations. As a result, they are of course not able to teach those basic skills to their pupils. Teachers themselves also referred to shortcomings in these areas on the part of some colleagues.

An additional problem according to some school managements and school boards is a lack of willingness on the part of teachers to take part in in-service training programmes. The efforts and pressure exerted by some school managements to encourage teachers to follow further training are not always successful. Some participants expressed their amazement that in-service training for teachers is not compulsory. The teachers in the study expressed a willingness to engage in such training, but preferably not during school time, because this would lead to lessons being dropped. Moreover, they did not feel that all the courses on offer are equally useful.

Who does what?

One of the research questions was whether the role division between the different actors is clear to everyone. This turns out not always to be the case, and even where the role division is clear, the relationships between actors sometimes leave something to be desired in practice.

It emerged in this study that, in secondary education in particular, the role of parents in the school participation council is limited, especially when it comes to educational content. In practice, parents are not yet a party who are able to play their envisaged stakeholder role to the full, namely keeping a critical eye on the organisation.

The role of the local authority is very limited when it comes to educational content. The local authorities in the study acknowledged this, though this did nothing to dent their ambitions for education in their municipalities or the fact that they are held accountable by parents for this. In some municipalities relations with school boards are good and there is an acknowledgement of a common interest. Other municipalities are accused of not keeping to their role by trying to interfere in tasks relating to school administration, creating friction with school boards.

In the past, school boards were able to leave a great deal to their school management teams, and still do so today. A relatively new factor is that school boards are now the direct point of contact for the Dutch Inspectorate for Education with regard to the quality of their school or schools. According to some participants in the study, some boards do not yet appear to be accustomed to this new role. Some participants felt that they are only interested in financial governance and care little about school achievement or educational quality.

Only a small number of internal supervisors took part in the study. They were not easy to find or to recruit for the study. Those who did take part are conscientiously seeking to give content to their supervisory role. A few participants appeared to be unfamiliar with this role. According to other participants, the internal supervision does not yet function adequately in practice, and in reality they consider this role to be somewhat superfluous. Parents on the school participation council, local authorities and school boards are further removed from educational practice than school managements. Teachers and school management teams are the ones who have to put flesh on the bones of the policy objective to improve pupil performance in basic skills. A few secondary school management teams are failing to interest their teachers in this task. Some primary and secondary school teachers who took part in the study also meet with resistance from their colleagues. It is a dilemma: if a diktat is imposed from above that teachers must focus on basic skills, teachers could turn against this decision. On the other hand, if school managements wait until teachers themselves develop initiatives, there is a chance that this will falter or come to nothing. The teachers in this study expressed clear expectations about the role of school management. They feel that school managements should take the initiative to make basic skills part of school policy and to tackle 'unwilling' or underperforming teachers head-on. The participants in the study reported that this does not happen. Teachers sometimes reported that, partly because of the size of the school, school managements have become more remote from the primary process, and perhaps because of this may be out of touch with teachers on this point. On the other hand, teachers readily admitted that they are fairly convinced of their own rightness on this point.

The study shows that the problems lie more in the processes than the structure of the school organisation. According to some participants, the large size of Dutch schools plays a role here, too. The sharing of information between the different parties, mutual trust and communication are not always optimum; there is no guarantee that everyone will actually commit to the objective; the cooperation in the team and the direction from school management and school boards is sometimes less than ideal. Schools and teachers do not always feel it is self-evident that they should be the owners of the problem, especially in secondary education where their priorities lie primarily in their own subject field.

B. Conclusions and discussion

Does the policy have a chance of succeeding?

A first condition for the success of this policy is that the different stakeholders in education see the usefulness of or need for a focus on basic language and arithmetic skills. The slight decline in the achievements of Dutch pupils in the international rankings, and more recently the downward trend reported by the Inspectorate for Education in the results in secondary school examinations in mathematics, Dutch and English, point up the need for this focus. All actors consider a good acquisition and command of basic skills to be important. Pupils simply cannot get by without them, whether for their own (further) education or for their (future) functioning in society in general. This is one point on which all parties are agreed and where there is definitely support for the policy. Another condition is that a greater focus on achievement and results must fit in with the views that people hold about educational quality. However, that is currently not always the case. The study makes clear that giving a more central place to performance and results meets with some resistance, in particular against increasing the number of tests and examinations, as well as raising the fear of being held accountable for the results. As far as an increased focus on results is concerned, these fears are unfounded, because the tests involved are diagnostic in nature and intended to establish which knowledge and skills a pupil has internalised at a given moment in time. The reference levels offer some guidance for the basic skills required. Moreover, a result-focused approach does not mean more tests, but better tests. It is not 'holding to account' that is of prime importance, but the development perspective for pupils: giving positive feedback on what has gone well or badly, why and what can be learned from it. This kind of positive feedback does not detract from the intrinsic interest and motivation of pupils. Today, in 2011, approximately 30% of Dutch primary schools and some 20% of secondary schools work in a result-focused way. Government policy is that these figures should be raised to 60% and 50%, respectively, by 2015. School managements and school boards will need to apply some persuasiveness to bring their schools and teachers round to working in this more result-focused way. It will be important here to make a clear distinction between the two types of tests. The motivation will undoubtedly increase once people see the positive results of this approach in practice. Another condition is that people's roles must enable them to make a contribution to improving the performance in basic skills and thus to educational quality. This presupposes that the mutual role divisions are clear and that the time and resources are adequate, so that people are able to fulfil their roles properly. We saw that considerable problems arise in secondary education when there is no clear ownership of the need to tackle deficiencies in the mastery of basic skills. There is also a lack of time and resources to create structural scope for this. The problem now appears to be placed on the shoulders of individual teachers, whereas a structural solution is an absolute necessity. Extra time and lots of practice are key factors in raising the arithmetical skills of pupils. Arithmetic should therefore be on the timetable in all years and in all forms of secondary education and should be anchored in the school policy. This requires that all teachers who teach subjects that require arithmetical skills from pupils must work together

to give form and content to that policy (Schölvinck 2010). The Netherlands currently devotes much less time to arithmetic/mathematics than other countries which take part in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and also devotes less time to reading. On the other hand, Dutch primary schools devote a relatively large amount of time to basic arithmetic/mathematics skills: on average 25% more than other OECD countries.

There are also opportunities in secondary education to attach language targets to subject content in subjects other than Dutch language. This would give students feedback on the way in which they express themselves verbally and in writing about the subject content.

Even before the proposed focus has been fully implemented, critical voices can already be heard. The danger that the balance will now swing completely the other way towards a one-sided emphasis on measurable performance in language and arithmetic/mathematics does not however appear to be very real. The art will be to apply the focus in such a way that it has little or no impact on other focus areas. There is a great deal to be gained from targeted instruction, more effective methods, optimum utilisation of the available teaching time and of course good teachers. This would leave scope for other subjects and focus areas.

It is recommended that this policy focus be maintained for an extended period. Both theory and experience shows that changes in education can only be successful if the policy is consistent and cohesive and is in place for some time. Given the policy plans, the signs are that this will indeed be the case. The consistency of the policy is however a very different matter. The world of education is confronted not only with the policy objective of improving basic skills, but also with targets such as accommodating pupils with disabilities or behavioural problems in mainstream education, ensuring that more pupils go on to forms of higher education, promoting citizenship and excellence. Not all these goals appear to be reconcilable, and this is likely to prove the case in practice. It may be that the goal of ensuring a good mastery of basic skills and raising performance in these areas clashes with the policy objective of accommodating disabled pupils in mainstream schools. It remains to be seen, including for the participants in this study, how the education system will cope in the future with (even) more diversity in the classroom, especially if this is accompanied by deep spending cuts. The educational field benefits from clear prioritisation of policy goals and from being given a realistic chance to achieve them.

One problem in the implementation of the policy, apart from the fact that teachers may have difficulty with differentiation in the classroom, is that they themselves may not have a mastery of basic skills. This places demands on in-service training for incumbent staff and on the quality of teacher training colleges for the teachers of the future. It is therefore to be welcomed that the government is seeking to raise the education level of teachers, professionalise incumbent teachers and school heads and improve the quality of teacher training programmes. There are plans for mandatory registration of teachers in a professional register, which would also carry a requirement for in-service training via accredited programmes. Teachers are certainly willing to commit to in-

service training – there is for example great interest in the ‘teacher’s scholarship’ – but there is currently not much enthusiasm when it comes to basic skills. Accreditation and mandatory in-service training could certainly offer an option here.

If the policy is to succeed, alignment will have to be sought with the motives of the various actors in committing to this policy goal. Those motives can differ from one actor to another, and can even differ between primary school teachers and their counterparts in secondary education. Basic skills must first and foremost be acquired in primary school, and then consolidated in a remedial sense in secondary school. It is the task of school management to translate the envisaged policy objective into educational practice for teachers and to smooth away any resistance with the right mix of pressure and support.