Teacher Evaluation in The Netherlands and its Relationship to Educational Effectiveness Research

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Abstract

In this article, we describe the history, current practice and future of teacher evaluation in The Netherlands. After a short introduction describing the Dutch educational system, we present information about teacher evaluation practices performed by persons outside the school (the Inspectorate) and inside the school (the principal). We then pay attention to the progress of teacher and school effectiveness research in The Netherlands and the relatively weak links between research and evaluation practices in schools. Finally, we outline some potential future developments in the field of teacher evaluation in The Netherlands.

The Dutch Educational System

In The Netherlands, compulsory education starts at the age of five. In fact, however, almost all four-year-old children already attend elementary schools and there are plans to change the law in the near future in line with this practice. Fulltime compulsory education ends after 12 years of schooling, but part-time education (at least one day a week) is compulsory up till the age of 18. Students attend elementary schools for eight years and then move on to secondary education, which consists of different tracks. Pre-vocational education and junior general secondary education take four years, senior general secondary education takes five years while pre-university education takes six years. After secondary education, students can attend vocational training institutions at several levels or enroll in universities.

According to the Dutch Constitution, education is one of the main concerns of the
government. As a result of a long struggle on the establishment of schools in the beginning
of the 20th century, the educational law now enables groups of citizens to found schools,
which are in line with their religious convictions. As a consequence, the majority of
elementary and secondary schools in The Netherlands, about 70 per cent, are privately run
by school boards. In addition, vocational education and even universities are sometimes
based on a specific religion. Although the Dutch population has become more and more
secular over the years since World War II, the educational system still reflects the religious
groups, which formed the Dutch society a century ago.

Most private elementary and secondary schools are Protestant or Roman Catholic, but
there are also some Jewish and Hindu schools, and recently several Islamic schools have
been established. There are also private schools, which are based not on religion, but on
specific educational principles such as the ideas laid down by Maria Montessori, Peter
Petersen and Rudolf Steiner. The government bears all costs for these schools and parents
do not have to pay for their children to attend them.

The government is obliged to offer public schools throughout the country for all citizens
who do not want their children to attend a school based on a religion or a specific
educational principle. Representatives of municipalities run these public schools. The
constitution states that all schools are free to determine what they teach and how they teach
it. Schools can choose the textbooks they want to use and they can define their own
organization within the school. Teams of teachers fulfill these tasks under the leadership of
the school principal, who is held accountable for all decisions in this field by the school
board.

The government, however, exerts some basic control on the quality of education by
defining the school subjects which have to be studied, the educational goals which have to
be attained by students at the age of 12 (in elementary education) and the content of
national examinations (in secondary education). The government also defines the number
of hours students are supposed to be taught weekly and yearly and controls the training and
qualification requirements of teachers (Topbac, 2001). Lower authority levels, such as
municipalities or provinces, are not involved in the establishment of general rules and
regulations for schools. The central government is the only relevant authority in this
respect.

Teacher training for elementary schools is provided in institutes for higher vocational
education and lasts four years. Teachers for the first years of secondary education also
attend four years of higher vocational education and qualify in specific school subjects.
Teachers for the final years of pre-university secondary education are university graduates
who have followed a postgraduate teacher training of one year. When teachers have
acquired their certificates, these are valid for the rest of their lives. In The Netherlands
there is no obligation whatsoever for teachers to update their educational knowledge in
order to keep their certificates. In fact, the only reasons for teachers to get expelled from
the teaching profession are criminal activities, especially sexual abuse of children and/or
financial malfeasance.

Currently, there are 7,753 elementary schools in The Netherlands with 103,300 teachers
who serve 1,638,800 students and 668 secondary schools with 67,300 teachers serving
891,000 students (Topbac, 2001).