
This article is based on a verbal presentation given to the Quality of Childhood Group in the European Parliament. Notes taken during the presentation were formulated into the article below, which has been checked and approved by Luc Stevens.

Education in the European Union – Systemic Changes Required

by Luc Stevens

Director of the Netherlands Institute of Educational Matters

Introduction

Our current school system is still based on the model of the assembly-line of the 19th century factory

Our school-system was developed in the 19th century when everybody was enthralled by the success of industrialization and standardized processes. The industrial-age assumptions about learning can be summarized as follows (derived from Peter Senge et al, 2000):

- Children are deficient and schools fix them
- Learning takes place in the head, not in the body as a whole
- Everyone learns, or should learn, in the same way
- Learning takes place in the class-room, not in the world
- There are smart kids, dumb kids, problem kids etc
- Schools are run by specialists who maintain control
- Knowledge is inherently fragmented
- Schools communicate the truth
- Learning is primarily individualistic and competition accelerates learning.

However, in this way we not only created an educational system but at the same time a **social system**. In the past decades scientists have found that the characteristics of this social system are hampering the very process of learning itself and all efforts to improve the effectiveness of the learning process will fail if we maintain the old elements of this social system.

In short the system itself should be changed in order to improve the learning environment. That is the theme of the second session of the Working Group on the Quality of Childhood.

A new system of learning is based on the following:

We should create an educational system, that is characterized by a good pedagogical climate with the following elements:

First component: Create the conditions for development:

- In the first place teacher and student should establish a normal human relationship with each other as one human being to another and respect each other in that way; intuitively we all know this because when the relationship between the teacher and the student is

disturbed the learning stops or is highly disrupted. Said in another way: the attitude of the teacher to the student or of that of the student to the teacher influences in a very significant way the quality of the learning process;

- The child develops himself or herself and the teacher should create an environment that is conducive for this process;
- Children are individuals and differ regarding their talents, their tempo and their temperament. The school should accept this as a precondition and not force the children into a rigid framework;
- The three basic psychological requirements should be fulfilled, i.e. the need for relationships, the need to feel competent and the need for autonomy.
- The child is a subject and not an object. The child orchestrates his or her own development.

Second component: ensure the self-reliance of the student and that he or she can take responsibility for his /her own situation and own development.

- If we don't create these conditions it is harder for children to cope with the requirements, which are defined by the teacher and educational policies. Consequently the child may feel helpless and become indifferent, and ultimately decide to drop out all together, not only from school, but also from striving to build a meaningful life.
- The teacher should communicate high expectations to the child and ensure that the child feels confident and self-reliant because he or she succeeds in meeting the expectations and also experiences real progress. The children should have the experience that it is worthwhile to do one's best.

Third component: support, challenge and emancipate

- The school should, on the one hand give the student structures, support, encouragement and motivation and on the other hand challenge the student to explore the subject in question in his/her own autonomous way.

Creating a pedagogical climate in schools to encourage development

by Luc Stevens

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SUMMARY

*This is a report about a research project which the Netherlands Institute for Educational Matters (NIVOZ) undertook regarding the mismatch between supply and demand in five primary and nine secondary schools in the Netherlands. The conclusion of the survey: students and schools suffer from **under-achievement** because of the following:*

- *There are permanent problems in the match between the curriculum and the demands and possibilities of the students;*
- *With regard to autonomy and responsibility there is a great discrepancy between what the students could be expected to desire on the one hand, and on the other hand what the teachers think that the students are able to handle and consequently the room for manoeuvre that the teachers dare to give to the students. This is a main point of conflict;*
- *Teachers find it difficult in the work situation to really grasp the perspective of the student; students experience that it is difficult to reach their teachers in the work situation.*

***Recommendation:** If only we would abandon the strict time schedule in our schools and give the students more freedom in this respect, it would already mean a major change. In my view there is not one reason to keep this current school system as it is today.*

I will introduce some new insights about the subject at hand by presenting a recent survey conducted in the Netherlands in five primary schools and nine secondary schools. Both students and teachers were interviewed:

- The students were interviewed about their well-being and their views with regard to their work and the educational process;
- The teachers were asked three questions:
 - What are your ambitions?
 - What are your competencies?
 - In which way is the school an obstacle for you to attain your ambitions, and utilise your competencies, or in other words: what is wrong with the school?

Paradigm shift: the position of the student changes from object to subject

The survey was done in the framework of a larger project called 'School Ethos'. A number of schools, both primary and secondary, participate in this project, all of which have the

intention to reach a higher level with regards to ethical standards. In addition these schools want to put the student at the centre of their activities. To put it another way: they want to shift from a position where the student is an **object** to a position where the student is a **subject**.

The overall outcomes of the research are as follows:

- Most of the students do not find the classroom or the school unpleasant;
- However, there is a mismatch between, on the one hand, the cognitive wishes and possibilities of the students and, on the other, the curriculum supplied by the school;

The main findings of the research project were as follows:

Space for personal initiative and activity

Students want:	Teachers want:
Desire for more choice and self-regulation	Are ambivalent with regard to the needs and wishes of the students
Want a teacher who is available to challenge and help	To be in control
Want a teacher who talks less	
Have a need for more responsibility	

Working and learning in the classroom

Students want:	Teachers want:
Appreciate in general the atmosphere in the class	A good atmosphere is most important
The programme is very often unsuitable	To contribute to the development of children as human beings
Teachers should not explain everything, but assist if required	To take into account the large differences between children, but the rigid school systems are not very helpful in this respect. To give students more responsibility, but they do not do this because of the rigid programme which they have to implement.

Peace and quiet in the classroom

Students want:	Teachers want:
A good atmosphere in the classroom	Strictness and consistency with children
Dislike fuss and angry teachers	
Teachers who trust students and who are fair	

The student-teacher relationship

Students want:	Teachers want:
A teacher who is happy, makes jokes and is fair	Teachers do not trust themselves to give the students more room to manoeuvre and the students are asking for this Attention for informal contacts
Appreciate the efforts of the teacher on behalf of the student; the teacher should be available	
For older students: a teacher with whom you can have a short talk	That children feel safe and trust their teacher Children who are honest
At work teachers do not always understand you	

The student-student relationship:

Students want:	Teachers want:
Friendship with other students A good ambience	Are ambivalent with respect to the wish of the students to work together
Cooperation and helping each other	

Conclusions of the survey:

1. There are permanent problems in the match between the curriculum and the demands and possibilities of the students;
2. Regarding autonomy and responsibility there is a great discrepancy between what the students could be expected to desire on the one hand, and on the other hand what the teachers think that the students are able to handle and consequently the room of manoeuvre, that the teachers dare to give to the students. This is a main point of conflict;
3. Despite the fact that teachers are interested in their students, the research showed that teachers find it difficult in the work situation to really grasp the perspective of the student; students experience that it is difficult to reach their teachers in the work situation.

The rigid supply structure of schools leads to under achievement

Summary: the rigid supply structure of schools leads to under achievement

The development of the students whom we interviewed and the role of the teacher as their guide is strongly dominated by the supply side, for example, by the curriculum and its standardised performance expectations. The supply is fully standardised with regards the following:

- the time schedule;
- the space;
- the content / the curriculum;
- the goals,
- the norms and the results;
- the relationships between teachers and students and among students.

There is no room for individual differences and there is no room for a dialogue between students and teachers and the school.

The students challenge the teachers and the schools to give them more space, more flexibility and more dialogue about what to do and how to do it.

Our research has shown that the students are prepared to do the work, but they want more freedom in the way that they do it.

Research in the USA and Europe shows that there is a serious and structural underachievement in our schools, because of the mismatch between supply and demand. The Americans use the term the '**under achievement syndrome**' of our schools for this .

There is not one reason to keep this current school system as it is today.

If there is not one reason to keep this current school system as it is today, what could then be the alternative? What could we do in a concrete way?

Abandoning the strict time schedule would already mean a major change

There are many alternative approaches. Take, for example, the work of Prof. Ferre Laevers, the director of the Experiential Education Project. The current school system is fully standardized on the basis of a time schedule. If we would only abandon the strict time schedule and give the students more freedom in this respect it would already mean a major change. Some students need more time for a certain task , and certain others less time. When the time standard has been set free both types of students can move ahead at their own speed. This does not mean that a student can choose at any given moment anything he/she wants to do. There is freedom, however within a certain framework.

Planning one's own time enhances motivation

Students don't tend to waste their time in these circumstances. If they are allowed to plan their own time they can find their own way of doing things, they can choose with whom they want to work and because of these freedoms they become motivated.

At present, NIVOZ is working with two large school networks to make the transition from a school based on supply to a school based on the demands of the students. The schools that are in transition are characterized by the following:

- It is more quiet in the school;
- The students use their time more efficiently;
- Raising achievement occurs more quickly;
- Disappearance of behavioural difficulties (this is the experience of NIVOZ in the 45 primary and secondary schools in which they are currently carrying out the project);
- Better school climate
- The children are better motivated.

In schools for children with learning difficulties the transition to the new approach is also characterized by higher achievement of the students, because the children are more challenged than in the former situation.

Class size and homogenous age groups are less important parameters

Does it make sense to put children of the same age together? In a standardized system it does, but in a non-standardized system it does not.

What is the impact of class size? The class size can be between 10 and 30 children, and the exact number in this range does not matter that much. What is important is that the children feel responsible for their own work and for the quality of the climate in the classroom.

Bibliography

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Luc M Stevens (1941) was a professor of special education at Utrecht University till 2002. His research addressed the quality of teacher student interaction as a prerequisite for learning, motivation in education, school ethos and school reform. He was strongly involved in the development of a more adaptive education in the Netherlands and in educational policy. At the moment he is the director of the Netherlands Institute of Educational Matters (www.nivoz.nl), a think tank on education.

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